



The Wisdom of Teams

By Jon R. Katzenbach
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Introduction Since its initial publication in 1993, *The Wisdom of Teams* has provided hundreds of thousands of readers with the keys to outstanding performance. A proven source of timeless insight, this revolutionary book has broad applications in the workplace and beyond. From the boardroom to the living room or classroom, the principles revealed by consultants Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith challenge conventional wisdom about group dynamics and explore the surprising factors that truly drive success. For anyone who feels frustrated by colleagues or despondent about underachieving in any aspect of life, *The Wisdom of Teams* is an effective and eye-opening trove.

Topics for Discussion

1. Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith assert that forming a high-performance team leads to greater success than "going it alone." In the past, have you generally preferred working independently or in a group? How did *The Wisdom of Teams* affect your perceptions of teamwork? How can teams benefit even the most rugged individualists?

2. The essential ingredient in high-performance teams is the creation of quantifiable goals. What are your current professional and personal goals? Using the parameters outlined in the book, who are the bona fide members of your teams? How can you measure their performance in meeting- -- and surpassing- -- these targets?

3. On page xxvi of their introduction, the authors discuss the crucial issue of time and its relationship to a team member's capacity. Consider the teams you currently participate in, including those that are merely working groups. How would you characterize your current capacity load? What would be the most effective way of improving your own time/capacity ratio in relation to that of your teammates?

4. Early in the book, on page 21, the authors emphasize the distinction between real teams and other types of groups that try to work together: "Teams are discrete units of performance, not a positive set of values." Given these parameters, are you involved with any real teams? What would it take to transform some of your groups into real teams?

5. The goals for the Burlington Northern Intermodal team (introduced in chapter two) were extraordinarily challenging, ranging from animosity between truckers and the railroad industry to the worst possible scenario for a proving ground. Do you face any similar obstacles in your life, particularly those that require "intermodal" maneuvering? What can be learned from this team's approach?

6. What techniques can help team members foster and exploit mutual candor? What are some of the underlying reasons that can make a team inhibited rather than candid, and how can those inhibitions be eased?

7. How would you respond to skeptics who might say that dramatic turnarounds- -- such as the tremendous reduction of errors in a Knight-Ridder newspaper's advertising department- -- could have more easily been accomplished through the work of one very detailed oversight manager?

8. Meetings seldom rank high on anyone's list of enjoyable activities. Consider the de facto meetings you regularly attend as well as the less formal assemblies that take place in your life. How could the Team Performance Curve outlined on page 90 enhance the outcome of your various meetings, from a staff meeting at work to a parent-teacher conference at your child's school?

9. Consider the various tasks you need to accomplish each week in all aspects of your life. How could chapter five's "vital signs," defined on page 105, enhance and ease the completion of this work?

10. On page 133, the authors explore the conundrum of effective team leaders, summarizing the essence of the team leader's job as "striking the right balance between providing guidance and giving up control." In what ways could this concept benefit all areas of your life, even those that don't appear to be related to leadership issues? Which portion of the spectrum presents more of a challenge for you- -- providing guidance or giving up control?

11. The authors offer clear ground rules for navigating the special situations often encountered by teams, particularly the process of getting a team unstuck or inspiring a team to rise to new levels of achievement. Which scenario best describes the status of your current primary team? Create a plan (with quantifiable results, of course) for facilitating the necessary change within the team.

12. Page 148 features a quotation admired by Kodak's Steve Fragos and attributed to the Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu: "When the best leader's work is done, the people say, 'We did it ourselves.'" Consider your own leadership philosophy, no matter what your job title or family role implies. Is this philosophy consistent with that of the inspiring top-management leaders you've known throughout your life?

13. Discuss the executive team meeting transcript that begins on page 225. How might you have responded to the various issues raised in the meeting? How would you characterize the balance of power and the decision-making process within this team?

14. Appendix A summarizes the author's counterintuitive findings, while Appendix B illustrates the fact that a flourishing team can be beneficial in a wide variety of contexts- -- from manufacturing to education. Drawing on your community, add your own questions and statements of purpose to these two grids. What answers and results can you infer from *The Wisdom of Teams*?

15. In the book's epilogue, the authors discuss the incredible power of civic pride in bringing victory to the Killer Bees, a boys' high school basketball team from Bridgehampton, New York. The anecdote shows that unbridled enthusiasm is indeed the key ingredient that spawns all other attributes of a winning team. Discuss the ways in which the concept of "civic pride" can be adapted to teams in other settings. How can you ensure that this sense of pride becomes an enduring legacy?

About the Authors: Jon R. Katzenbach is a founder of Katzenbach Partners LLC, consultants in the areas of organization, leadership, and workforce performance. His published works include *Why Pride Matters More Than Money*, *Real Change Leaders*, *Teams at the Top*, and *The Work of Teams*. Douglas K. Smith is a leading consultant on organization performance and change. His published works include *On Value and Values*, *Make Success Memorable!*, *Taking Charge of Change*, and *Fumbling the Future: How Xerox Invented, Then Ignored, the First Personal Computer*. Mr. Katzenbach and Mr. Smith are both formerly of McKinsey & Company.