The Wisdom of Teams
by Katzenbach and Smith, published by HarperBusiness in 1994

Book Review by Robert Youker

A few years ago when he spoke to the Washington DC chapter of Project Management Institute, Professor David Frame (formerly of George Washington University and now of University of Management and Technology in northern Virginia) recommended the best selling book, The Wisdom of Teams, by Katzenbach and Smith, two McKinsey and Company consultants and published by HarperBusiness in 1994. ($15 ISBN 0-88730-676-4) It is an excellent book, highly recommended for all project professionals, since it takes a different tack than the average book on teambuilding. It is especially important for Project Managers interested in the area of Leadership. It is a very useful compilation of information about what makes an effective team.

First lets see what useful information a project manager can learn from the book. The authors make a clear distinction between a work group (a collection of individuals) and a team. They define a team as, "a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and working approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable". The authors emphasize the twin concepts of performance goals and mutually accountability as making a team different from a work group which is just individuals doing separate work which will be collected into a final product. Each member of a team is committed to a joint final product. Whether you need a work group or a team depends on the nature of the task. I suspect in the project management field some project groups are teams and some are work groups. The authors say the demanding performance challenge is a key element in the success of a team.

The key question for the project manager is, how can we change a work group into a team if the project requires a team approach? A major point the authors make is that the culture and systems of most organizations favor a work group versus a team! Also in our society there is a bias toward individualism versus true teamwork. Just look at how exceptional in basketball that Larry Bird and Bill Bradley were as team players! No matter what top management says about the value of teamwork, the individuals will operate on the basis of the reward and punishment structure of the organization which is usually biased toward individualism.

The book states that a team needs the right mix of skills in three areas:
1. Technical or functional expertise;
2. Problem solving and decision-making skills;
3. Interpersonal skills.

All three are required to work effectively as a team but different members can have different skills.

The authors' major point is the importance of the team's commitment to the joint aspect of the common purpose and the performance goals which set the tone and aspiration for the team. The performance goals must be specific and grow out of the statement of purpose. Finally to become a team there must be agreement on a common approach which defines how they will work together to accomplish their purpose together with the concept of mutual accountability. The work group of individuals does not have this concept of mutual accountability.

In growing from a work group of individuals to an integrated team most groups follow a fairly standard team performance curve in the following steps:
1. Working group - collection of individuals doing own work.
2. Pseudo-team - there is a need for integrated performance but they are not trying to do it.
3. Potential team - there is a need for joint performance and they are trying to improve.
4. Real team - there is a common purpose, goals, approach and accountability.
5. High performance team- team members are committed to each others personal growth.
There is a risk in attempting but not achieving a real team process.

The authors list five characteristics that define teams as follows:
1. A set of themes that convey meaning about the basic purpose and identity of the team.
2. Enthusiasm and energy level.
3. Event driven histories. (galvanizing events or stories that propel performance)
4. Personal commitment.
5. Performance results. (outstanding results)

There are a variety of common approaches for building team performance up the curve from working group to high performance team as follows:
1. Establish urgency and direction.
2. Select team members based on skills, not personalities.
3. Pay particular attention to first meetings and actions.
4. Set up some clear rules of behavior.
5. Set and seize upon a few immediate performance-oriented tasks and goals.
6. Challenge the group regularly with fresh facts and information.
7. Spend lots of time together.
8. Exploit the power of positive feedback, recognition and reward.

Chapter seven deals with the role of the team leader, an important area for Project Managers. The requirements for leadership of a team are much different than that required for leading a group of individuals in a work group. "Team leaders act to clarify purpose and goals, build commitment and self confidence, strengthen the team's collective skills and approach, remove externally imposed obstacles, and create opportunities for others." There is a critical balance between doing things themselves

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The following are roles of the team leader:
1. Keep the purpose, goals and approach relevant and meaningful.
2. Build commitment and confidence.
3. Strengthen the mix and level of skills.
4. Manage relationships with outsiders, including removing obstacles.
5. Create opportunities for others.
6. Do real work.

The authors go on with chapters on overcoming obstacles and the role of top management. The paperback version ends with a very useful Appendix titled, The Teams Question and Answer Guide. This was prepared after the hard back publication based on questions the authors received from readers of the first edition. There are 24 pages of useful questions and answers. The book contains the stories of a number of teams to illustrate the points made in the text and to describe the field research which led to the book. The title, The Wisdom of Teams, reflects their view that each team develops a wisdom of its own.