

Developing World-Class Teamwork skills – an Applied Approach

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Abstract

Teams consisting of creative minds who have outstanding skills can create new ideas or processes that guide an organization towards new innovations and more success. Today, organizations need agile teams which are adaptive and can make quick decisions and adjustments when the business or even the industry calls for it. Companies will have to conduct projects led by teams that might disrupt entire market segments and create new standards. Against this background, the work aims at gaining insights into the mindset and attributes needed to create high-performance teams.

Keywords: High-performing teams, teamwork, mindset, attributes

JEL Classification: M10, M14, M16

1. Introduction

In today's fast changing working environments, pursuing highly-efficient as well as goal-oriented teamwork, is imperative and of utmost importance. When a task cannot be accomplished by a single individual alone, a group of individuals, a team, is needed. This holds in particular true for a dynamic and complex environment.

In general, as Katzenbach & Smith (1993) state in their book on the wisdom of teams: teams outperform individuals. They define a team as a limited amount of individuals with complementary skills, including a common purpose, performance goals, and a shared responsibility. It is argued that both teams and performance pose an unbeatable combination.

In contrast to bureaucracies and owing to constantly changing economic conditions, more and more organizations in developed countries implement flatter and less hierarchical structures to meet the shifting demands at the workplace. By doing so, flexible teams emerge and are empowered to take responsibilities in a wide range of areas and branches. As a result, teams constitute today the primary unit of performance for most working individuals (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993).

To imagine that organizations in today's world are competing without making use of technological support, is not possible. Every individual is to some extent subjected or affected by technology and so are teams. It can be argued that almost every team has a virtual setup, albeit to different extents. Technological advances, the internet and the global workforce have created opportunities for virtual teams to emerge.

Modern technologies such as e-mail or videoconferences are enabling team setups which could not be imagined before. Teams can consist of individuals who are working in the same organization, or they can also be created through joint ventures between different service providers, who are doing business across organizational boundaries (Maznevski and Chudoba, 2000). Therefore, the work seeks to understand which key aspects needed to create high-performance teams.

2. Theoretical Evidence

Transactive Memory

Team learning can be described as the process of individual team members sharing their own knowledge, contributing to the generation of new knowledge and then evaluating and combining this knowledge (Argote, 1999a). The combination of numerous individual memory systems and the communication taking place among individuals, results in a transactive memory system (Wegner et al., 1985). It is a shared system that supports the encoding, storage, and retrieval of knowledge procurable to the team (Wegner, 1987).

According to Wegner et al., (1985), knowledge available to a team is a product resulting from the newly gained information by the individual team members. Any new information is usually related to a certain domain. Each team member is responsible to convey relevant information to the team member who is the expert of that domain.

The expert's task then is it to ensure that any relevant information received is correctly encoded, stored and accessible at any time. However, it is important to understand that this system of keeping and enhancing the knowledge status of a team, is very efficient but, depends heavily on each team member's knowledge and willingness to share any new information (Wegner, 1987).

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are an emerging phenomenon in today's working environment. A community of practice is a group formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour (E. Wenger, 2011). They are meeting on a regular basis, or are alternatively connected primarily through e-mail networks (E. C. Wenger and Snyder, 2000).

Communities of practice are identifiable through the shared domain of interest of the people participating in the respective community and engaging in joint activities or discussions. The aim is to develop a mutual repertoire of resources in form of sharing practices, exchanging personnel experiences as well as addressing recurring problems (E. Wenger, 2011). This exchange results in the ability to solve problems more quickly as well as developing and fostering professional skills of a group or a single employee within a company.

Communities of practice are fluid, interpretive and often incorporate people from outside the team or organization (Brown and Duguid, 1991). Hence, teams with a higher degree of virtuality have enhanced access to a wider range of communities of practice, which creates diverse and social connections. Moreover, connections between individual team members and relevant communities of practice, have a positive impact on transforming potential team knowledge into usable team knowledge (Griffith et al., 2003).

Range of Work Team Possibilities

In today's fast changing world, organizations face the challenge to deal with globalization, demographic shifts, demassification of society as well as advances in technology (Ilinitch, et al., 1996). The more flexible and adaptable an organization is, the more opportunities it will have to successfully overcome these challenges and the higher the chances will be to remain competitive in the long-run.

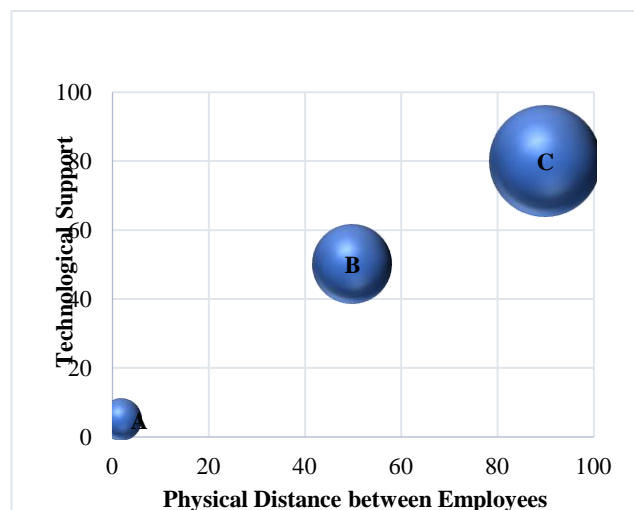


Figure 1: Own representation based on dimensions of virtualness from Griffith et al., (2003)

The larger the physical distance between team members and the more time they are working individually, the higher is the degree of virtuality that exist within the team. Griffith et al., (2003), suggest differentiating between three team categories: traditional, hybrid and pure virtual teams. Figure 1 provides an overview about the different dimensions of virtualness in which teams can exist.

Synergies

The knowledge developed through further interaction within the team is what can be called synergistic knowledge (Griffith et al., 2003).

Furthermore, synergistic or emergent knowledge, can also be described as the creation of knowledge within a team through frequent collaborations as well as discussions. Synergistic knowledge usually goes beyond the knowledge initially available to an individual team member (Argote, 1999b).

Diversity

In today's working environment the workforce is becoming more diverse in many different aspects (e.g. gender, ethnicity). To safeguard that teams are able to share information across various functional as well cultural boundaries, it is imperative that team individuals who introduce different views and backgrounds to a team, are successfully managed (Lipnack and Stamps, 1993).

When speaking about diversity in teams, three different categories of diversities can be determined: informational diversity, social category diversity, and value diversity (Jehn et al., 1999). To manage the challenges outlined above it is suggested to provide a bridge across diversity within the team. If team members of highly diverse teams experience trust and social cohesion, the team internal communication will be strengthened resulting in higher performance (Mannix and Neale, 2005).

Threats of Social Loafing

According to Williams and Karau (1993), the reason why social loafing is occurring, is that the relation between individual effort and valued results is stronger when working alone instead of working in teams. People who work on a collective task do not put the same effort into it as if they were performing the same task individually (Kravitz and Martin, 1986). The social loafing phenomenon demonstrates that people, when working in group settings, might be less willing to contribute to the overall team success (Williams and Karau, 1993).

Certain characteristics within a collective environment (i.e. group size or nature of task) can have potential implications on the motivation of individuals who are part of the respective environment. According to Williams and Karau (1993), the "Collective Effort Model" aims to demonstrate those characteristics as well as the resulting implications.

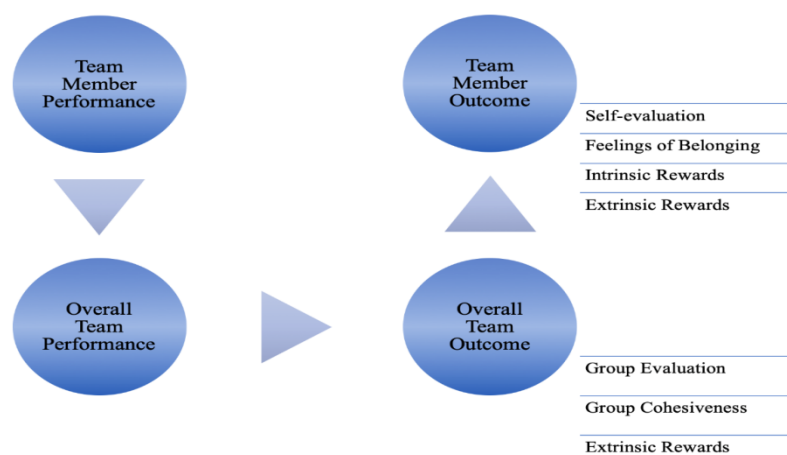


Figure 2: Own representation based on the collective effort model from Williams and Karau, (1993)

As indicated by Figure 2, individual effort must be connected with individual performance and this must lead to a positive overall group performance. Finally, the group performance must generate a good group result and should positively affect all team members. A disruption of these relationships might have a negative impact on the effort an individual is willing to put in.

The personal effort will not be seen as useful for the completion of the task and will therefore be reduced (Williams and Karau, 1993). To treat team members more as individuals and to make the work situation less social, is therefore a logical solution for the social loafing issue. However, such solutions may only help in some circumstances as they clearly go against the contemporary trend in today's working environment (Ellemers et al., 2004).

High-Performance

As displayed in Figure 3, to reach goals, top teams have to cope with three different dimensions of performance. Top teams must have a common direction and the understanding of values and the goal should be the same for all team members. If teams have to solve challenging and complex problems, interaction skills are imperative. Lastly, top teams therefore must constantly strive for renewal in order to further extend their capabilities (Herb et al., 2001).

The dimension quality of direction includes aligning priorities and focusing on strategic team targets and direction as well as developing talents and driving growth initiatives. Additionally, the quality of interaction contains the encouragement of critical

thoughts through efficacious dialogues and capitalize diverse viewpoints. Whereas key characteristics related to the dimension quality of renewal encompass the encouragement of personal development and the embracement of risks.

At the same time, this dimension deals with avoiding bigotry and making use of knowledge and insights from the external environment of the company. In order to achieve progress, teams have to simultaneously move forward on all three frontlines. However, it is difficult for teams to improve their activities by themselves and in the end all teams have to figure out on their own what could be best to enhance performance (Herb et al., 2001).

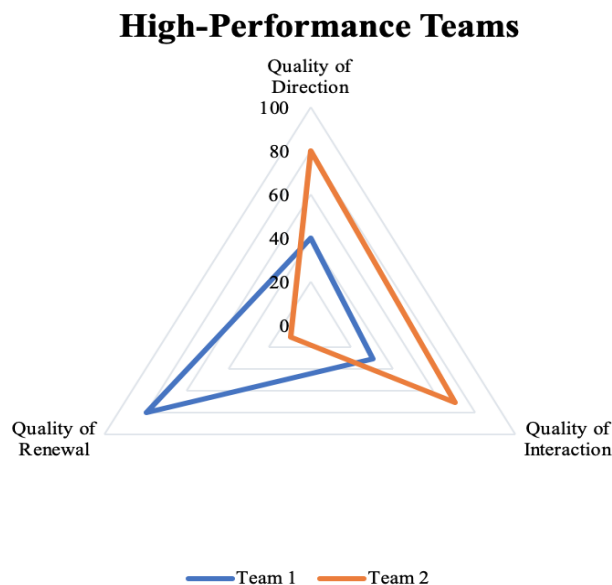


Figure 3: Own representation based on three dimensions of performance from Herb et al., (2001)

3. Methodology

For this work, the qualitative research method has been chosen. To investigate aspects of teamwork, desk research has been carried out. To focus on highly competitive companies, that might approach teamwork differently, the analysis took Apple, Google, and Toyota into consideration. The first section of the findings part is consisting of an analysis of teamwork in these companies. In total, three companies have been analysed.

The second part of the findings section attempts to identify the teamwork trends in the future and will furthermore provide a model with key attributes for high-performance teams. The aim is to demonstrate what attributes are needed to create high-performing teams. And lastly, the discussion aims to apply the most relevant sub-topics of the theoretical evidence to best practices analysis and to discuss key attributes for high-performance teams.

4. Findings

Teamwork is important to foster innovation and to unleash creative thinking. In this section of the paper, the teamwork philosophy of the addressed companies will be analyzed. Those companies stand for innovative products and impact the development of today's world to a large extent. For the creation of innovative products, human capital is playing a major role. Companies that are managing their employee portfolio well will have a competitive advantage in the future. Nowadays, for companies, it is of utmost importance to enrich their employee pool with diversity in terms of migration, industry, career path, gender, education and age (World Economic Forum, 2019). Apple Inc., Google LLC and Toyota industries are all performing well in terms of fostering the company internal diversity, which is another reason why those three companies have been selected for the best practice analysis.

Apple Inc.

Teams from many different areas within the company such as technology, finance and marketing have to team up and collaborate. Collaboration throughout the whole company is the key feature allowing Apple to deliver highly developed as well as innovative products to their customers. The foundation of teamwork at Apple is based on seven key components (Albanese, 2016).

One person is in charge: At Apple one person per team is fully responsible for one specific work stream or task and is fully accountable for delivering the work on-time. This approach tends to lead to less frustration among employees, less team internal politics as well as less confusion about who has to do what.

Project teams meet once a week: Meetings held on a weekly basis ensure that all team members are always up-to-date and are aware about the status of the overall project.

Appleproject teams do not only meet when things are going well but also when times are more busy or stressful. This is important as once a team starts to meet irregularly, team members cannot be kept up-to-date and the overall team target will get out of focus.

Teamwork starts at the top of the organization: The senior management team at Appleis willing to set an example of outstanding teamwork. If the board members of a company are demonstrating lack of trust and power plays amongst each other, the subordinated people will follow this example.

Trust is key: The goal of a leader must be to hire people and trust them to deliver exceptional work. Especially in the case of Apple, where many different components have to co-work in order that the final product will be satisfying, trust amongst employees is of utmost importance. Every individual has to be absolutely convinced that the work delivered by another team member, is as good as the own work.

Have arguments: At Apple employees are encouraged to seek for conflicts and challengesand to mutually finding the best possible solutions. Steve Jobs philosophy about his role was not to be easy for the people but to make them better. This philosophy goes in-line with one very important principle which aims to unleash the full potential of the people. At Applemany people can have wonderful arguments, but at the end the best ideas always wins.

Let people make decisions: Appleemployees are trusted to make the right decision at the right time. As in every other company, autonomy and fairness is a major driver for the motivation of employees.

Work towards one goal: All teams at Appleare working towards one goal. Steve Jobs used to paint a picture of that goal (e.g. iPhone) and brought it to the attention of all employees. Thereafter the different teams started to work on different sub-projects. With this strategy, all teams are aware of how the end product will look like and the teamwork puzzle starts to come together step by

In order to remain competitive, businesses have to continually innovate. Hiring culturally diverse team members is helping a company to further develop products as well as to improve creativity and innovation(Rock and Grant, 2016).

The current employee portfolio is already demonstrating a rich diversification, however with new hires the company aims to become even more diverse(Apple Inc., 2019).The data below in Figure 4are providing an overview about the cultural background of newly hired employees since the 1st of July 2017.

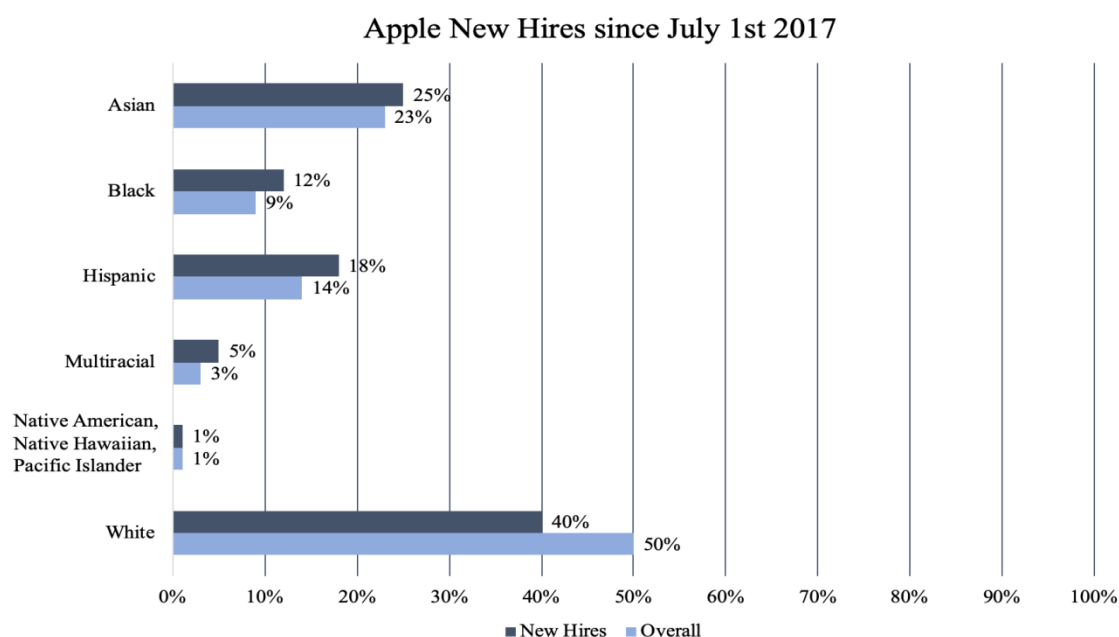


Figure 4: Own representation based on Apple new hires since July 1st 2017 from Apple Inc. (2019)

The company seeks to guarantee an inclusive culture for all employees where all beliefs and voices are accepted and respected. Talents are hired from as many different areas as possible in order that development can be pushed throughout all levels of the company (Apple Inc., 2019).

Google LLC

The company spent years to investigate on how to build the perfect team. It turned out that it does not really matter about who is on the team but rather how the team is working together. Five key factors have been identified that make a Google team effective (Google, 2016):

Psychological safety: Google employees do not fear to take risks and are vulnerable in front of other team members. In teams with a good failure culture, members dare to admit mistakes, are more collaborative and demonstrate the willingness to take on new roles and tasks. Workers in Google teams are encouraged to ask questions and to contribute ideas.

In order to get the most out of their teams and to benefit from innovative thinking and diverse ideas, Google promotes a so-called judgment-free space.

Dependability: Workers at Google are reliable and deliver high quality work on time. However, if a project gets delayed due to whatever reasons, workers do proactively communicate potential backlogs and work collaboratively on a solution. The company's standards for excellence are extremely high and can only be met if team members work together in order to get the job done.

Structure and Clarity: At Google all individuals are aware about the job expectations and do understand how they have to proceed in order to fulfil these expectations. Every employee knows that a lack of performance can have a significant impact on the overall team success. The company uses "Objectives and Key Results" (OKR) in order to communicate short - and long-term goals which are set either on an individual or on a team level.

Meaning: Google employees are to a great extent passionate about their company. The majority of the people understands the purpose of the work they are contributing to the overall team outcome. Team effectiveness is very high at Google as work is personally important to team members.

Impact: Each team working at Google is eager that their work has a significant impact on the success of the company. Team members who have confirmation that their work matters are able to create changes and are more innovative. Furthermore, employees who understand that their individual tasks are important to achieve the team's target are more motivated and committed.

Factors which someone might consider as important for effective teamwork such as collocation of teammates, team size, extroversion of team members and the size of workload are not connected to team effectiveness among Google teams (Google, 2016). Table 1 is showing the improvement in diversity among hired employees over the past five years (Gassam, 2019).

Table 1: Own representation based on Google hiring data from Google (2019)

		Race (Plus system categories)				
		Asian +	Black +	Latinx +	Native American +	White +
Overall						
2014		34.9%	3.5%	5.9%	0.9%	59.3%
2015		37.4%	4.3%	6.5%	0.7%	54.9%
2016		43.0%	3.7%	5.8%	0.6%	51.1%
2017		43.8%	4.1%	6.3%	0.8%	49.7%
2018		43.9%	4.8%	6.8%	1.1%	48.5%

Toyota Industries

In 1997, Toyota launched the first mass-produced hybrid car, a pioneering achievement that had a ground-breaking impact on the car industry as we know today. Despite being one of the most innovative car producers in today's complex automotive industry, Toyota's framework for its guiding principles remained simple.

The Toyota Way is consisting of the core values and business methods, that all workers at Toyota have to respect and apply when carrying out their daily work. It builds the basis for the company’s corporate culture (Toyota, n.d.).Figure 5 aims to show an overview of the Toyota Way and related components.

This work does not contain an analysis of the whole framework but will provide a deeper insight into the teamwork patterns at Toyota and how the company is valuing mutual respect among employees.The main strengths of the company internal teamwork can be identified in the Toyota Production Systems (TPS).

In order that the car manufacturing process can be improved and further developed, problems have to be detected and solved. To carry out teamwork in the most efficient way, every team member is educated to apply the following working behaviour (Liker and Hoseus, 2010), including problem solving through collaborative work. Additionally, team members do not fear that raising their voice and revealing problems will put them in trouble or might even result in losing their jobs. Lastly, team members motivate each other in order to achieve the company’s goals.

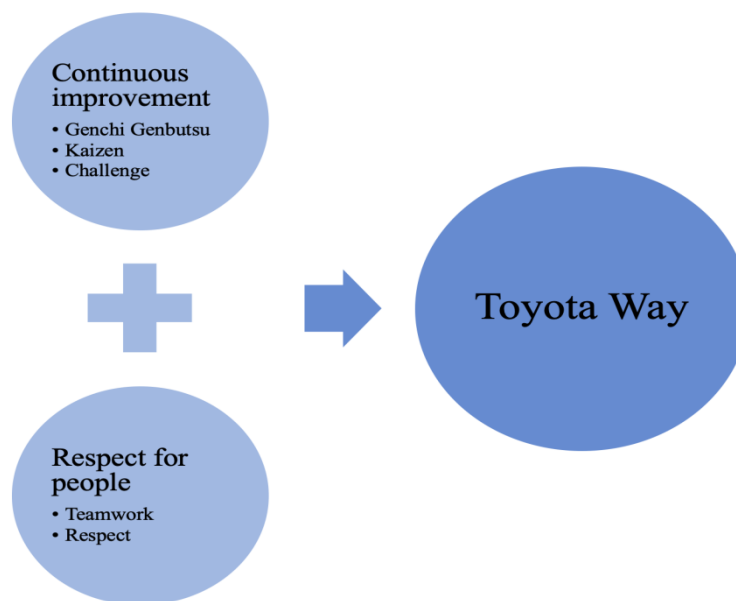


Figure 5: Own representation based on the Toyota Way (Toyota, n.d.)

Nevertheless, at Toyota, teamwork matters not only at Toyota Production Systems but throughout all levels and business areas of the company, from the top the bottom(Toyota, n.d.). The company is fostering teamwork with the goal to create synergies among different teams across several business areas. In order that teamwork can be smoothly integrated into the corporate culture, every Toyota worker has to attend a teambuilding workshop where the company’s philosophy about teamwork is conveyed and personal capabilities of employees are further developed(Meyer, 2017).

Table 2: Own representation based on Toyota leading with diversity from Toyota (2018)

		2014	2015	2016	2017
Blacks		6.14%	6.46%	6.50%	6.57%
Latinos		4.44%	4.75%	5.04%	5.18%
Asians		13.86%	13.77%	14.22%	15.92%
Women		23.78%	24.03%	24.37%	25.85%

Toyota believes in respecting workers for their contribution and respecting them for who they are. Toyota is eager to have a workforce that is not only sustainable but also diverse. The more diverse the workforce is, the better can Toyota reflect its surrounding society as well as its customer portfolio (Toyota, n.d.).

As indicated by Table 2, Toyota's diversity is growing year-over-year. In 2017, more than 25 percent of the workers at Toyota were people of different colours. The company states that diversity and inclusion must be a key topic with regards to the future development of Toyota's business. Teams consisting of more diverse workers demonstrate innovation and relevancy, which are two key attributes for Toyota's long-term success. Toyota does foster an inclusive environment where all team members are inspired to deliver high-quality work. Additionally, each individual employee is encouraged to raise his voice, to challenge the status and to develop its own personality (Toyota, 2018).

5. Discussion

It appears that in the future there might be little room for single players. May it be in private life in form of a neighbourhood, or in the work life in form of business teams, people will have to engage into teamwork in order to remain successful. To combine different minds and to make use of different ways of thinking, will be necessary in order to compete against the various challenges life offers and to persist in today's world.

Figure 6 displays a potential transformation from the traditional execution-as-efficiency towards the new execution-as-learning approach. Despite that, the model above can be widely applied, depending on the business environment, some attributes can lose their importance or can even be fully exchanged. Nevertheless, teams, which cover most of the seven attributes illustrated above, should be successful in the long-run and across various business areas.



Figure 6: Own representation based on execution-as-efficiency vs. execution-as learning from Edmondson (2016)

In the case of Toyota Industries, this was expected. Still, as Apple and Google have their roots in the technology sector, it would have been logic to find indicators about pure virtual teams in some business areas. Nevertheless, some face-to-face interaction is still happening among the vast majority of teams in both companies.

With regards to diversity, it has been demonstrated in the findings section, that all three companies are eager to hire as diverse people as possible, which underlines that this topic is of high relevance. All organizations are facing tough competition in their respective business sectors and therefore have to constantly demonstrate world-class teamwork skills in order to further innovate and create competitive products.

The analysis of best practices identified the following key attributes for future high-performances teams, have been identified: Multi-skilled Workers; Diversity; Failure Culture; Mutual Responsibilities; Transparency; Mutual Respect; Out-of-the-Box Thinkers, as displayed in Figure 7. These attributes appear to be relevant for teamwork as of today but will not meet the demands in the future.

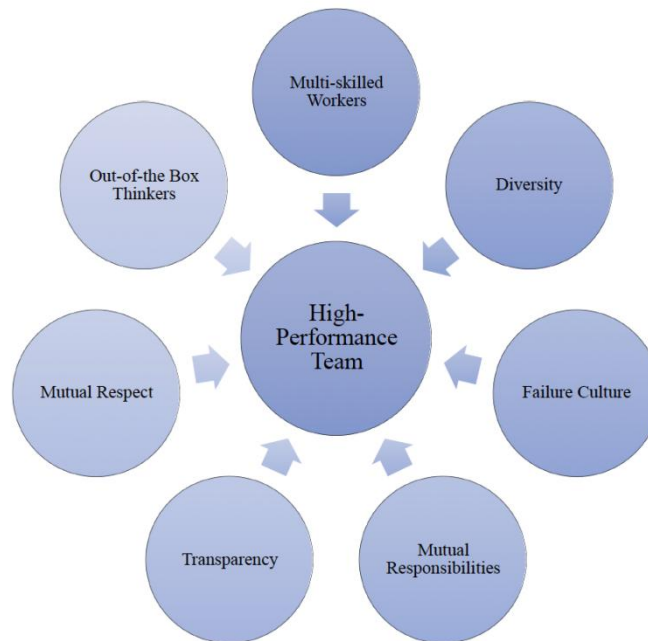


Figure 7: Own creation of attributes for high-performance teams based on best practice analysis

Depending on the future development of teamwork, some of the attributes will lose importance or need to be exchanged. Without doubt, future teamwork will demand for new attributes, which are not known yet. As soon as teaming-up will become the worldwide standard for organizations to tackle complex business projects, the previously described version of the model, will have to be extended.

6. Conclusion

Aside from providing recommendations for successful teamwork, this section of the conclusion answers also the first research question: Which key attributes are needed in order to create high-performance teams? It is recommended that high-performance teams put a high emphasis on the implementation of attributes demonstrated in the own created model.

The model provides a solid basis to ensure successful teamwork, be it in organizations or in general. Teams, which cover all or least some of the attributes, tend to have motivated people and an overall healthy team internal atmosphere. The model guarantees the personal development of employees, mutual respect, shared responsibilities and transparency for task executions as well as diversity which will bring up a unique spirit for fostering innovation and creativity.

Teaming-up among organizations has been identified as one of the major trends. Cross-organization teamwork will become more and more important in terms of solving complex business projects and maintaining high company performance. The development of future teamwork trends has to be closely monitored, in order to extend the current model with additional key attributes for high-performance teams.

Without doubt, future teams will have to compete in even more dynamic and complex business environments as today. Nevertheless, if the current model is adjusted with relevant key attributes according to teamwork trends, teams will remain successful and competitive in the future.

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