

## **Properties of Self-Directed Teams**

While it seems desirable to have a motivated and energetic team, why is it important to you? The best way to describe the value of such a team is with an example.

My very first development team was building a complex cryptographic system for the U.S. Army Signal Corps. We had just started life-testing the first model when a hurricane hit. This was some time ago and weather forecasting was pretty crude, so the storm was a complete surprise. By Sunday morning, I got so worried that I went to our basement laboratory in an old building in downtown Boston to see how the equipment was doing. Even though no one had called them, the entire team was there.

We spent the next several hours turning off and disconnecting the equipment and getting everything up on benches, desks, and crates. Water had been seeping up through cracks in the floor, and by the time we were done it was ankle deep. It took a lot of work for all of us, but everything was saved and the project finished on time.

This is characteristic behavior of self-directed teams: the members sense what is needed without being told, pitch in to help, and do whatever is needed to get the job done. This is their job, they own it, and they intend to finish it. This is why self-directed teams will stick together right to the end of the job. Typically, employee turnover on self-directed teams is zero. The members may know that the team will be dispersed, the organization disbanded, or the contract transferred, but this is their project and they intend to see it through.

While a self-directed team would be useful for any kind of job, such teams are essential for complex and creative development work. This kind of work requires everyone's wholehearted participation. If team members are not committed to the job and in agreement with its goals, they will not strive to do a superior job. Quality work is not done by mistake. It is done by thinking, caring, and motivated people. Self-directed teams have some special properties that set them apart from all other teams. The following are the five properties of self-directed teams.

1. A sense of membership and belonging
2. Commitment to a common team goal
3. Ownership of the process and plan
4. The skill to make a plan and the discipline to follow it
5. A dedication to excellence

Such teams typically devise their own development strategies, develop their own plans, and are motivated to do superior work.

The members of a self-directed team are part of a cohesive and distinct group, and there is no question about who is on the team and who is not. All of the members share a common bond of membership and they seem to have a special communication medium. They are so familiar with the job and with each other that they can almost speak in shorthand. The most impressive aspect of a self-directed team is the way that its members work together. Cooperation is the essence of teamwork and it is the key to building the required trust and spirit. Self-directed teams are close-knit and cohesive groups and, while the members may not all be close friends, they are all valued contributors.

Cohesion is the bond among members that knits them together. Cohesion requires contact and close association. The team members must share a common workspace, see each other often, and communicate freely and openly. You can't legislate cohesion; it is a consequence of the team's working context. Cohesion is a fundamental property of a self-directed team.

Team cohesion is strengthened by the support the members provide to each other. Human beings are social animals and few people like to work entirely by themselves, at least not for very long. Team membership provides a comfortable human environment and a source of mutual commitment, support, and motivation. All of the members of such teams make a special effort to meet their obligations to their teammates.

When a team does not have clear boundaries and its members seem to randomly drift on and off the team, no one can assume responsibility and the members cannot rely on each other. This is the principal problem with part-time team members. When developers are simultaneously assigned to several projects, they have split loyalties and their teammates cannot rely on them for support and assistance. They are rarely available when needed and no one really knows whether they are on the team or not.

While it is normal for developers to have some demands from prior projects, these must be the exception and every team member should have a principal project assignment. Teams with a substantial number of part-time members can rarely jell. The reason is that it is hard for someone to feel committed to a project when management is unwilling to make it their principal job.

Self-directed teams share a common commitment to a goal. While the goal has importance to the organization, its principal value to you is to provide the focus for the team. The team members' motivation results from the common commitment they have made. Once they have decided to accomplish this goal, they will do their utmost to bring it off.

To maintain this commitment, the team must receive feedback on its work. Whoever heard of a winning team that didn't know the score? To be motivated, teams must know when they are ahead and when they are behind. They also must see progress every day. Only then can teams continue pushing to achieve their goals. For high personal and team performance, feedback is the single most important ingredient.

*Goal tracking and feedback are critically important. Effective teams are aware of their performance and can see the progress they are making toward their goals. In a study of air defense crews, those with frequent and precise feedback on goal performance improved on almost every criterion. This compares with the stable, unimproving performance of crews that did not get feedback.<sup>1</sup>*

Another property of self-directed teams is ownership. This is not just any job these teams are doing; it is *their* job. They feel responsible for it and have decided just how to do it. Such teams speak of their work with a special pride. To have this sense of ownership, all of the team members must participate in defining their own processes, producing their own plans, and tracking and reporting on their own work. The members must be solely responsible for doing this job and they must know that nobody else will do it. This responsibility provides a sense of personal importance and a feeling of self-respect.

Finally, when a team has a defined process and a detailed plan, the members will know what to do. While this seems obvious, it is fundamental. When a group is unsure about what to do and it doesn't know where to get guidance or help, it cannot jell. It is merely a group of confused people looking for direction. Under these conditions, the members will work to different priorities, not support each other, and often work

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<sup>1</sup> Watts S. Humphrey. 2000. *Introduction to the Team Software Process*. Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley.

counterproductively. Following a process and a plan will provide stability and build the team's motivation and energy. To be self-directed, teams need a common goal, they must have a defined and understood process, and they must also have a detailed plan.

Self-directed teams are especially well suited for creative development work. They define the process and the plan for doing the work and they have the discipline to follow that process and plan. Discipline, in fact, is what separates the experts from the amateurs in any professional field. Their willingness to rehearse, to practice, and to continually improve is what makes them experts. Studies have shown that the principal distinction between world class performers and those who finish in the middle of the pack is their disciplined behavior.<sup>2</sup>

The final property of self-directed teams is their dedication to excellence. For teams to work cooperatively and to maintain their energy and motivation, all members must strive to do more than their share of the work. Everyone volunteers for the tough assignments, pitches in, and contributes to the best of his or her ability. The spirit and energy of such teams depend, however, on the quality of everyone's work. If a member does sloppy work, makes frequent mistakes, and causes excessive rework, it wastes everyone's time. If this happens often, everyone will know the source of the problem and will resent it. Poor work by any team member can quickly destroy the team's spirit. Then you will no longer have a self-directed team.

While these five properties—membership, commitment, ownership, discipline, and a dedication to excellence—are essential, they are not enough. Self-directed teams, above all, must have effective leadership. The team leader must motivate, coach, drive, and urge the members to perform to the best of their abilities. In short, the quality of your team's work depends, more than anything else, on your leadership. If the team is properly trained and built and if you are an effective team leader, it will perform superbly, almost regardless of the challenges it faces. But if you do not provide effective leadership, your team will not excel and it may not even do a competent job.

While providing such leadership may seem like a daunting challenge, particularly if you have never been a team leader, leadership is not that difficult. At least it is not difficult if you know how to go about it. While all of the conditions described in this chapter are needed for self-directed teams, meeting these conditions is not as difficult as it may seem. Teams like to jell, and when they are given the proper leadership and support, they generally will. That, in fact, is the principal objective of this book: to show you how to provide the leadership your team wants and needs to do consistently superior work.

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<sup>2</sup> Atul Gawande. 2002. The Learning Curve. *The New Yorker*. January 26, 52–61.