From A-Teams to T-Teams

Fostering Innovation
through Radical Democracy

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When confronted with a problem, many companies immediately respond by assembling their top players in the field. This seemingly-intuitive response may hinder your company's ability to identify and resolve important issues. By relying on your company's A-Team, you may be missing out on the ideas of equally talented – but less obvious – innovators.

A-Teams and T-Teams

List the names of your top people in any department (be it Finance, Human Resources, Marketing, Research and Development, or any other part of your organization). That is your A-Team. Chances are good that when you encounter a problem in the company, you ask them to fix it. This impulse is not necessarily wrong; after all, your A-Team members have a high level of experience within their purview and can quickly and adeptly address most issues. However, even the most skilled practitioner sometimes fails to overcome troubling problems. As situations change over time, an overreliance on past experience may hinder your A-Team's response to novel scenarios. This, in turn, can stifle innovation as team members rehash old war stories instead of looking at the new landscape in front of them.

When A-Teams become stagnant, mixing up team composition can be the fastest way to achieve a creative breakthrough. In lieu of creating another team based solely on past experience in the field, combine individuals with a variety of skill sets to form what is called a "T-Team". Some companies have always focused on hiring what they dubbed "T-Shaped Employees": individuals with a proven track record of success in one field (the downstroke of the T), and a broad familiarity in other areas (the crossbar). Focusing on the T-shape makes employees more versatile, allowing the organization to better adapt to change. This same T-shape model can be applied to groups. By combining a few experts in the core subject with employees from diverse backgrounds, you can create a T-Team with the right combination of breadth and depth.

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The Benefits

Following the T-Team model can transform the nature of your business and make your company better able to respond to complex problems. T-Teams

outperform A-Teams for the following reasons:

Diversity. Your A-Team members are undoubtedly all skilled in their chosen field. But their similar job titles may indicate a problem of similar backgrounds, experiences, and core assumptions. A homogeneous group stifles creativity, which can lead to stagnation and groupthink. Merely changing the composition of the group forces employees to explore new ideas, to challenge key assumptions, and reimagine experiences. Every individual in every department sees a slightly different picture of the same organization, but these conflicting viewpoints are rarely aired. This is, in part, due to a lack of opportunity to do so, but it also is based on a lack of honest communication with other departments.

Coverage. Allowing your best employees to work on different projects helps divide your top talent (and good ideas) across many issues. If several pressing problems are concentrated in one department, ensure each project team has a key person to give them the inside view of the situation. The other team members can lend their talents to other projects, freeing them from redundancy, as well as keeping the department functioning normally during periods of change.

Cohesion. Many companies intentionally or unintentionally foster competition between departments. While this can drive employees to work harder, it also creates an environment of self-centeredness. Employees see other divisions of the company as enemies, not allies, which causes infighting and unwillingness to share resources. T-Teams draw on the resources of many different departments, creating a more collaborative atmosphere. By focusing on problems that have an impact on the company as a whole, even territorial employees have a reason to cooperate. After all, a business is only as strong as the weakest of its component parts, so all departments should be concerned about the welfare of the entire company.

Development. Working on projects outside their typical domain is a great way to expand employees' skills and organizational knowledge. While it cannot take the place of other forms of employee development, it can contribute to employees' knowledge of other

departments. Working regularly with members of other departments also improves inter-departmental communication.

Finding the Right Fit

Of course, T-Teams are not meant to completely replace A-Teams. Both types excel under certain conditions. Several dimensions determine the relative efficacy of an A-Team and a T-Team.

Speed versus Permanence. A-Teams are perfectly poised to deliver quick, decisive solutions. Their deep knowledge in the field and their shared experience give them the knowledge base to assess and intervene without missing a beat. However, these immediate solutions may need to be updated or replaced over time and may not address the underlying causes of poor performance due to homogeneous perspectives.

T-Teams view the problem at deep, comprehensive level. This positions them to provide strong, long-term solutions instead of merely treating the symptoms of an underlying problem. They also examine many potential types of solutions, relying on each member's

preferred information-gathering style to gain new insight. This depth comes at the cost of speed; T-Team members require more time to research past performance and investigate potential courses of action, making them ill-suited to devise a quick fix.

Known versus Unknown Variables. When the forces in play are obvious, A-Teams can identify and correct problems more readily. After all, if your computer code is buggy, you really only need software engineers to fix it; adding accountants, human resource managers, or marketing executives to the situation will not help fix the code any faster. Non-experts are unable to contribute fresh insight to a well-understood process and may slow your A-Team down.

When the issue is complex, such as company-wide absenteeism, T-Teams

are better able to implement a solution in the face of uncertainty. If the problem is under the influence of myriad of factors, the diversity of backgrounds in your T-Team will be better able to identify which factors are most pertinent to creating a solution.

Narrow versus Broad Application. If the problem is localized to one area, the fairest approach is to let the most heavily-involved people analyze the issue and provide a solution. Adding external consultants may overcomplicate the issue, and they will not have to deal with the long-term repercussions of their decisions. This is the kind of deep, specific problem that A-Teams are designed to handle, so simply let them attack the problem head-on.

When the application is broader, however, A-Teams may find themselves in over their heads. Anytime a problem

A-TEAMS	T-TEAMS
Provide fast turnaround times	Create long-term solutions
Investigate well-understood, clear variables	Explore uncertain, unknown variables
Execute targeted interventions	Apply solutions across a broad area
Refine and update existing strategies	Imagine and implement new strategies

requires attention throughout many departments or branches of a company, T-Teams are better able to address the system-wide effect.

Status Quo versus Change. At times, you may simply want to maintain your current position. If you have a working system that needs to be tweaked in order

stems from the best ideas rising to the top.

The Valve Model. Valve Corporation, a 300-person video game software and digital distribution company based in the Pacific Northwest, uses an intensely collaborative model similar to the T-Teams concept. At Valve, employees are

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to address new needs, A-Teams can brush off the dust and right any minor problems. Even the most efficient system periodically needs an update, and this maintenance is a valuable A-Team project.

When change is on the menu, T-Teams are your best asset. Their combination of skills and experience in a multitude of areas are good for brainstorming new ideas and finding unique ways to implement them.

Implementation in Action

While this model may seem abstract and difficult to incorporate into an organizational model, several well-known companies already make use of these ideas. Their innovative power

not strictly assigned to teams; the company implores its' employees to "vote with their feet" and actively seek out a project they feel has value to the organization. Whether the subject is digital content protection, play-testing designs, or hiring policies, any interested employee can join any project. This results in problem solving groups with a cross-section of the Valve staff. A typical project team might include software engineers, animators, script writers, psychologists, and economists. The result is a company that prides itself on creative problem solving and changing the core assumptions of the video game industry.

One of these cross-disciplinary project teams resulted in a new software platform called Steam. In 2003, Valve was already an established video game developer, but employees wished to create a more direct way to distribute their products. Accordingly, Valve conceived Steam as a digital storefront, allowing them to sell Valve games directly to consumers through the internet, as well as give users a space to interact and share their love of gaming. The result meshed the content distribution powers of iTunes with the social community of Facebook, and it quickly proved enormously popular. As of November 2012, nine years after its initial launch, Steam had 54 million active user accounts and 1,800 games available for immediate download. While notoriously tight-lipped about exact sales figures, Valve co-founder and managing director Gabe Newell claimed in 2011 that Valve was, per employee, more profitable than technology behemoths Google and Apple.

Valve's freeform business model, while not for the faint of heart, speaks to the power of T-Teams. Even within the constantly-advancing video game marketplace, Valve maintains a reputation as being uniquely innovative – and immensely profitable.

The IBM Model. Since 2001, IBM has used collaborative problem solving models to provide a quick, easy path to new ideas. Dubbed "jams", they allowed employees to come together in an unstructured open forum to explore possibilities en masse. Originally an internal process, IBM eventually opened up the platform to the public. In 2006, IBM InnovationJam attracted 150,000 participants from 104 countries and 67 different companies. Their goal was to accelerate change in the marketplace by seeking out the next big idea and develop it for a global audience. The initial phase of the project lasted about 72 hours, as enthusiastic participants made 46,000 posts on Internet message boards exploring possible options. Thirty-one of the best concepts were then released to the participants for critical examination and refinement. Users asked tough questions about profitability and popular appeal, and eventually built business plans and sample use models for the strongest products. The final ten ideas received

$100 million in start-up money from IBM. The most successful of these — creating an on-demand system for real-time analysis of traffic flow, infusing intelligence into the world's utility grids, introducing smart healthcare payment systems and a new business unit to provide solutions and services that would directly benefit the environment—became part of the IBM Smarter Planet agenda, and have since generated billions of dollars in revenue for the company.

Your Model. Every company culture is different, with entrenched beliefs about how ideas are generated and where to look for them. In practice, T-Teams require radical egalitarianism and the belief that good ideas can come from anywhere. Many companies instinctively reject anything that involves a total loss of control. If you're anxious about T-Teams, test them on a small scale about minor matters before increasing the size. If you're looking for ideas about how to improve your employee break room or what to do for the company retreat this year, try holding an open-space planning session to see what employees suggest. You'll likely be surprised by the breadth and depth of concepts presented, which may provide a basis for applying this model in other contexts.

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