

Structures 1

**Team 365
(the team that - almost -
doesn't meet)**

One of the most toxic practices in organisational life is equating 'team' and 'team meeting'. You could start a true transformation by simply splitting them as far apart as you can and by switching on the team permanently. In a perfect team, 'stuff happens' all the time without the need to meet. Try the disruptive idea 'Team 365' to start a small revolution.

In our minds, the idea that teams are something to do with meetings is well embedded. And indeed, teams do meet... But 'the meeting' has become synonymous with 'the team'. Think of the language we often use. If there is an issue or something that requires a decision and this is discussed amongst people who belong to a team, we often hear things such as, "*let's bring it to the team*". In fact, what people mean really is, "*let's bring it to the*

meeting. Put it on the agenda." By default, we have progressively concentrated most of the 'team time' in 'meeting time'. The conceptual borders of these two very different things have become blurred. We have created a culture where team equals meetings equals team. And this is disastrous.

If you plan activities for a team, chances are that you are de facto planning *meetings* and putting them on calendars: every month, every quarter, onsite, offsite... Inevitably, team life is progressively taken over by meeting time and its associated paraphernalia: prepare agenda, ask for items, decide venue, send invitations, have the meeting, take minutes, distribute the minutes... If you were to chart team life, it would look like a series of peaks (meetings), separated by times of silence and times of build-up.

'Stuff happens' at meetings, or so we think. So, you'd better be there! This concentration of energy, anxiety, performance, mind power, theatre, emotions and all other ingredients for the meeting-cookout also has an unintended side-effect. If the meeting is where 'stuff happens', I need to make sure that somebody representing my department (or my division or me) will be there. 'Representational teams' are the norm in many organisations. I call them 'Ambassadorial teams', consisting of people not representing themselves, but the group/division.

Some of them even have something to say. Others are there 'just in case'. Have a look at your organisation and see if you may have created a culture of over-inclusiveness. A culture where teams are not only at the core of collaboration (literally hijacking other forms), but also one where there are crowds of 'ambassadors' moving around, meeting regularly and returning to their quarters with different degrees of commitment and different-sized lists of actions. You may actually have quite a lot of intellectual tourism.

As a consequence of the mental model and practice that reads 'teams = meeting = teams', the team member merely becomes an event traveller (from a few doors down or another country?). These team travellers bring packaged information, all prepared for the disclosure or discussion at 'the event'. Once the package is delivered, the information downloaded and the decision made (if lucky), the concept of team membership and its intensity fade. The sense of belonging has been hijacked by the meeting itself. And so, after the meeting, there is a void, waiting to be filled by the next call for items for the next agenda.

Imagine now the opposite scenario, where the concept of membership is one of 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. And that this is when 'the real stuff happens', not at the meetings!

In 'team 365' mode, the meeting is an occasional event, something that happens when needed. It's not the centre of activity for the team. Instead, the emphasis is on the team as a continuous collaboration structure. The meeting is merely a device for occasional needs. Literally, Team 365 is always meeting, so it doesn't really need to meet. Well, almost.

Many people will see the above as a caricature. Sensible people will agree that the meeting is not the centre of the universe and that team life is a continuous endeavour. But this is very often just a politically correct answer. In many cases, the reality - and I suggest you look at your organisation with your eyes and mind wide open - is that team meetings have a huge magnetic effect and de facto suck the life out of organisational life. We have simply got the balance wrong. The meeting is a means, not an end in itself. Many organisations behave as if the opposite were true. How can you change things?

- Make your teams operate in 365-day, 'continuous meeting' mode and declare the formal team meeting a secondary activity that takes place only when needed. Invert the equation: the meeting should be the anomaly.
- 75% or more of the decisions that a team needs to make, don't need a formal meeting of all the team's members. Establish the rule that people who are empowered to make a decision, should make it in real time without needing to wait for a

formal slot on the agenda of the next 'team meeting'.

- Most of the routine sharing of information and ongoing tracking of progress in any project can be done online by using a simple (or complex) electronic tool. Shared drives on your server are an obvious (old-fashioned) way of having a single repository of information. Your firm may be a bit more sophisticated these days and have some sort of document management system or 'e-room' where teams can store documentation including minutes. Today, enterprise wikis allow for on the spot continuous editing. The days of emails going back and forth with different versions of documents (such as agendas or minutes) circulating for approval are gone.
- In team 365, the project leader is also a 'project leader 365', not just the information traffic warden pre, during and post-meeting. Project leaders facilitate continuous discussion and the working together of members, whether in duos, trios or bigger groups. If people need to collaborate, they'll do it any time, not just at the meeting. If decisions need to be made, they can be made at any time, not just at the meeting. All will be transparent and posted in a common repository. The project leader takes care of the continuous flow of information.
- People sometimes use a catchphrase in meetings to express that something doesn't belong in the

meeting; that it deserves to be dealt with outside the meeting, perhaps because it is complex. In jargon, that translates into: "*we will discuss this off-line*". Now think of the team as permanently 'off-line'. And the more things can be dealt with 'off-line', the less need there is for the meeting. So, ask yourself and your colleagues the magic question: "*do we really need a meeting for this?*" You will be amazed how many times the answer is, "*not really...*"

- Can you still have any team meetings at all? Yes, but not as we know them. Meet with colleagues to explore and increase the social understanding of the behavioural fabric of the team. Talk processes and behaviours. Talk strategy. Celebrate successes. Debate when an issue requires a face-to-face (or virtual face-to-face). The meeting now primarily has a social goal. Period.
- Team membership is team membership. There is no such thing as 'core members' and 'extended members'. If you need to call upon people's expertise from time to time, that doesn't make them 'extended team members'. They are people occasionally called upon. Most of the 'extended members' are often intellectual tourists or ambassadors. Many of them would be pleased to be de-listed as members and relieved from presentism duties (and if they're not, you may wonder how busy or needed they really are in their day jobs).

AIM AT HAVING TEAMS THAT DO NOT (NEED TO) MEET, BECAUSE THEY ARE 'ALWAYS ON'.

IF YOU DO MEET WITH THE WHOLE TEAM, DO SO FOR 'SOCIAL REASONS', TO ENHANCE ALIGNMENT, TO DISCUSS STRATEGY AND NOT TO 'DO THE WORK'.

COLLABORATION, INFORMATION SHARING, PROJECT TRACKING AND DECISIONS ALL TO HAPPEN IN REAL TIME, NOT AT MEETINGS.

GET RID OF TEAM = MEETING.

A TEAM MEMBER = A TEAM MEMBER.
GET RID OF 'CORE' AND 'EXTENDED'.

THE BEST TEAM IS THE ONE THAT DOESN'T NEED TO MEET. AIM HIGH FOR THAT.

Imagine...

Imagine you had very few meetings. Imagine that teams in your organisation were involved in continuous activity, with people working together all the time under a leadership that puts people and ideas together. Imagine a culture where meetings were the anomaly: they were enjoyable and useful as social glue and not a burden. Imagine a culture where decisions were made in real time without waiting for meetings; where transparent information on what is going on was always there with the same clarity and availability as logging in to the BBC news' homepage. Imagine that the excuse "*I haven't been informed*" no longer existed. Imagine that the expression 'bring it to the team' was an oxymoron: you are the team and can't bring it to yourself; you are in 'always on' mode. Imagine that you could start somewhere in the organisation and spread the idea virally....

In your organisation.

