

Helping teams create value



THE ART OF TEAMS

By Ralph van Roosmalen



artofteams.net



PRAISE FOR THE ART OF TEAMS

“In this book, Ralph shows his vast experience in the art of leading teams. He looks at different models, combining those in the new TOTA model. This got me instantly hooked because even though all models are wrong, some are helpful, like his model, and allow us to experiment with them. He also presents many different management tools. When I read the book, I immediately grabbed the “Conflict Impact Circle” and tried it with a team, which was a valuable experience. I am sure you will find something valuable for yourself as well. Which experiment are you going to run next?”

-DOMINIK MAXIMINI

Agile Leader at ValueRise Consulting, www.valuerise-consulting.de

“Teams have been in our society forever; they are an integral part of our lives and necessary for agile organizations to be successful. However, organizations are still struggling with creating well-functioning teams and leveraging their strengths. I found this book very valuable for anyone who likes to understand how to enhance self-organization and build high-performing teams and networks organizations. The book is very practical and easy to read. I specifically enjoyed the Reflection sections at the end of each chapter which helps me to create awareness about our current situation at my organization and come up with improvement steps.”

-ZUZANA SOCHOVA

Agile Coach, Trainer, and Author of the Great ScrumMaster and Agile Leader Book, www.sochova.com

“As late as a few generations ago, work could be measured by the output of one person. Skill development and education were built around this model. Just think about how apprenticeship works. But, today’s world is orders of magnitude more complex and models of work from that era are no longer sustainable. Where, before it took a person, today it takes a village. What Ralph has created here is a clear call to action to organizations to change how they think about people and teams. “

–EVAN LEYBOURN

CEO and cofounder, Business Agility Institute, businessagility.institute

“Ralph has written a very interesting book on building successful teams. Useful insights from diverse research and many other resources combined with his own experiences as a coach, result in a great model for inspiration and many hands-on, practical tips & tricks on how to build a high performing team. Easy to read, well researched and each chapter ends with helpful reflection questions to think about your own team(s). A must read for everybody who is in a team or works with teams. This great book will help you and your team gain insight in teamwork and how to be successful together.”

–HUIB SCHOOTS

Quality Accelerator, www.qualityaccelerators.nl

“Even if you have been working with or within teams for quite some time, The Art of Teams is a gem. Just understanding the history and definition of teams is already insightful. The real strength of the book however, is how well it is rooted in research without following one school of thought but thoughtfully comparing different ones and coming up with recommendations that are based in practical experience. Moreover, even for

that practical experience, Ralph doesn't rely on his own experience only, he also considers the experience of his peers. Ralph takes good care to not giving the reader the illusion that there is a silver bullet yet instead he offers various tools & methods that support you in finding your own way of making the art of teams a reality in your context."

-JUTTA ECKSTEIN

Co-author of Company-wide Agility with Beyond Budgeting,
Open Space & Sociocracy, www.jeckstein.com

"In 2021, we have more options than ever for building, organizing, and working in teams. And, we have more challenges than ever, as well as a confusing array of options to try to improve communication and teamwork. We have scientific data on what behaviors and practices correspond to high-performing teams. The Art of Teams draws on this information to provide effective visual models that drive and guide valuable conversations and grow effective, diverse teams. Rather than prescribe specific steps to take, the author gives us questions to reflect on at the end of each chapter. Especially important in 2021, there's lots of guidance specifically aimed at virtual teams. Ralph gives us a huge box of tools to choose from, with a helpful appendix showing what practices help with which dimensions of team health. There is so much to learn in this book about improving many dimensions of growing a successful, diverse, happy team. I'm happy to recommend it to everyone who wants to help their team improve."

-LISA CRISPIN

Co-author with Janet Gregory of the Agile Testing books,
agiletester.ca

“In the 21st century knowledge-worker environment value comes through the collaborative effort of groups of people working together, in teams. Ralph has drawn on his own experience and the wisdom of others to bring together in practical, usable format the important messages about teams and teamwork, offering actionable advice and real-world experiences that will be of value to you as either someone tasked with creating an environment where teams can flourish or as someone working on a team looking for ways to become more effective together.”

–SHANE HASTIE

Author, ICF Coach and Director of Community Development for ICAgile,
www.linkedin.com/in/shanehastie/

“There are plenty of books about teams but the problem is, they’re all written from one perspective containing 1 approach or proclaimed truth about what great teams look like. This book is different. It’s an A to Z of teams that gives you options for creating and nourishing teams in your context. We desperately want everything in the business world to be scientific, but often forget to mix in the art. That’s what this book will help you do.”

–JASON LITTLE

Author of Lean Change Management and Change Agility, leanchange.org

“If you want to create a happy, high-performing team, Ralph’s book, *The Art of Teams*, is the guide you need. He explains the pros and cons of various modules and theories so you can choose a path that’s right for you. He shares his own experiences throughout the book to bring you real-world examples. And most importantly, he takes the abstract and makes it very tangible so that you can start trying things with your own

team right away. I've known Ralph for years – as a colleague and as a friend. I can tell you that he genuinely cares about helping teams create value – and I believe that his book can inspire you to do the same.”

–LISETTE SUTHERLAND

Director Collaboration Superpowers, www.collaborationsuperpowers.com

“At Management 3.0, we believe that management is too important to be left to only a few people. Instead, we see leadership as a group responsibility. But self-management doesn't work in unhealthy teams. As a former team member and CEO of Management 3.0, Ralph looks closely at this vital prerequisite of our mission to create happy and successful organizations. Based on solid research, he gives tangible tools for a performing team. I recommend this book for anyone who wants to improve certain aspects of their team culture and needs quickly to implement ideas. But also for those who want to dive deeper into developing great teams. Combined with the website, “The Art of Teams” is a valuable resource that keeps on getting better.”

–KATHARINA WILLIAM

CEO Management 3.0, www.management30.com

“What a joy to read this lucidly written account of the numerous aspects of the premier building block of doing complex work today: working as teams. As always, Ralph makes an incredible amount of wisdom available as an easy read, drawing from his vast experience as agile coach working with many different teams. If you are looking for refreshing insights and practical tools, this is where to start.

–DAAN VAN OSCH

Software Talent Manager



THE ART OF TEAMS

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RALPH VAN ROOSMALEN

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Anne and Zoë #proud



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INTRODUCTION

My grandmother was born in 1921. She passed away a few years ago at the age of 96. There were no TVs when she was growing up, just a few cars in the Netherlands, and sending a letter to the other side of the world took weeks, if not months. Life was simple, and relatively slow.

Today, sending a message to the other side of the world just takes just seconds, screens are everywhere, and we can watch any series or film we want in minutes. We are, if we care to, we are connected 24/7 with everyone. Almost all organizations can switch within days from working together in an office to working 100 percent virtual. We can hear and see almost live video from Mars. I am based in the Netherlands, but I worked on this book with an editor from the United States, and the person doing the cover moved from Spain to Mexico during this project.

My grandmother witnessed most of these developments. Imagine what she experienced in one lifetime! Thanks to the internet, connections are everywhere, and I believe the flow of information and innovation will only go grow faster.

All of this is great and has advantages, but there are also disadvantages. I love home automation, connecting Google Home, Hue, Nuki, Nest, Smart fans, etc., to one system. My girlfriend regularly complains why everything is so complicated in our house. It is the same outside my house—a lot of innovation. But to create, support, and understand innovation is getting complicated. In addition, believe the problems organizations experience nowadays are getting increasingly complex.

To manage this complex environment, I believe you need to tap into teams, to bring people together in teams to address this new complex world. I am aware this is not the first book about teams. However, I do believe *The Art of Teams* offers something new and will add value for you.

First, it combines the best of many into something new. Why limit yourself to one model or approach? Take the best of many and try to improve upon them.

Second, the book talks not only about theories, it also helps you apply what works from them—and from my experience consulting organizational leaders. I describe many practices that you can use to help your team.

Finally, a book is static—unlike life—but I’ve come up with a dynamic solution. While working on this book, I’ve thought, *I should add this practice, or change that description*. However, I needed to choose one moment to publish this book. Therefore, there is also website connected to this book, which includes a community. It’s a place where people can exchange experiences, add new practices, and share learnings related to teams.

My purpose in business is to help organizations and people make the next step in improving, and by doing this, I believe people become happier at work. I try to help in many ways, and I hope this book and community offer another step forward in realizing my purpose! Enjoy reading and let me know if you liked the book!

Ralph

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The book is structured to support different ways of reading. It is divided into three main parts:

- Part I covers background and basic topics related to teams: history, a definition of team, team sizes, and team composition.
- Part II of the book is about the six components that are needed for successful teams. I describe each component in a separate chapter. I start with theory, then share practices that can help you support your team in developing the component. I end with questions to challenge you.
- Part III contains management and leadership related to teams. For example, I will cover the following: What kind of leadership is required for having successful teams? How do you reward teams, and how do virtual teams work together?

There are different ways to read this book. You can read it from cover to cover. There is logical structure in the book, so reading consecutively will cause you to start with the history of teams, and end with how virtual teams work. You will learn about the six components, read about the practices connected to the components, and be challenged to link the theory to your team.

If you are only interested in the six components, you can jump directly to part II and dive into the six components. You can read the chapters in

part II in any order. You can start with “Successful Teams Care about Results” and end with “Successful Teams Have Clarity!” or the other way around.

If you are already familiar with teams and what is needed to support their success but you just want some extra inspiration on a certain topic, you can also directly select the chapter related to the topic and get inspired by the practices. If your team has a challenge with trust, for example, you can read the chapter “Successful Teams Trust One Another,” learn about the practices, and implement them.

The last option is to just read the chapter you like! Maybe you just want to check out the content, and a certain practice, or title grabs your attention. Just read that specific part and use the book as a reference. Every chapter can be read as a standalone chapter.

Now, who is the intended audience for this book? I believe it is everyone who is working in a team or helping teams to become successful. I believe that every team member has a responsibility to help a team become successful and keep it successful. As a team member, you will gain insights into what makes a team successful, and maybe discover your strong and weak points as a team. The next step will be to help you improve your team. The same applies for managers, leaders, team coaches, scrum masters, and Agile coaches. By reading this book, you learn why a team is (not) successful and discover new tools to help a team become or remain successful.

You will also find several quotes by Jocelyn Carbonara in the book. She is the president of Spiritus Communications, a leadership consulting firm in the United States, and helped me conceive this book by supporting my views, while other times offering a different perspective.

What can a successful team create? As I’ve hinted, this book can help managers, leaders, coaches, and teams in many different organizations. In my opinion, whatever team you are on, that team should create value.

The way that value is manifested will be different in every organization. Therefore, in this book, I will just talk generally about *value* created by a team. Depending on your organization, it can be physical product, support, software, reports, etc.

I am aware that new practices that support teams are developed continuously. Therefore, also make sure to check out ArtofTeams.net to read about the latest practices, add your own practices, and share your learnings.

Enjoy the content—in any way you want!



PART I

CHAPTER 1

BRIEF HISTORY OF TEAMS

Dolphins are social. They understand there are more advantages than disadvantages from living in a group. In a group called a *pod*, they can easily find food, get better protection from predators, and meet fertile partners.

Most wolves live in groups called *packs*. Living in a pack ensures they can defend their territory, hunt together, care, and feed the young wolves.

Also, many primates live in groups. They work together to find and protect food, hunt, receive better protection from predators, and raise and protect their young.

There are so many examples of animals working successfully together that it makes you wonder why it took humans so long to discover the power of teams. People have known for many millennia that working together would increase their chance of survival. It started before human's recorded history. For the same reasons as animals, these groups were created to survive.

Working together also allowed humans to do more difficult tasks than one individual could—for example, to catch large animals like mammoths. Archeologists have found bones of such animals of the Upper Paleolithic Period (about 40,000 BCE to about 10,000 BCE).¹ The fact that they found those bones, and it was clear the animals were killed by humans, indicated a high degree of organization.

As humans developed, labor specialization occurred. Why try to catch an animal if you can't throw a spear and are much better at finding berries? People began working together to help each other—the first steps in labor specialization. While the group wasn't yet recognized as a team, people held different roles—often working to achieve a central goal or task.

Somewhere in the 16th century, in Old English, the word *team* popped up for the first time. It has several origins, but one meaning was *a set of draft animals yoked together*.² In the 16th century, the word also was used for groups of people working together.

In the 19th century, the industrial revolution started. This resulted in factories where many people worked together. However, they did not work in teams but mainly as many individuals in a group. The scientific approach to management by Frederic Taylor, a mechanical engineer who studied industrial efficiency in the late 1800s and early 1900s, made teams unnecessary. He looked at people as part of a machine, telling people exactly how to do their work. Most people worked at assembly lines, executing a small part of the whole production process. Teamwork in a factory was not necessary and therefore not done. People worked in groups, but not necessarily on teams. (More about the distinction between teams and groups in the next chapter.) As a result, the value of working with teams was forgotten by many organizations.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, researchers started a nine-year research program at the Western Electric Company. They performed their research at the Hawthorne Works, which was a large factory complex of the Western Electric Company in Cicero, Illinois. It resulted in the discovery of the *Hawthorne effect*, which refers to people changing some of their behavior when they are aware of being observed.³ However, one of the other findings was that when the workers worked together as a group, the value created by the workers also increased. They felt like a group,

connected through teamwork—just because they had the same work, same work environment, and met every day as a group. The conclusion was having people working together to improve work processes resulted in increased production. Again, unfortunately, the concept of teamwork was somehow forgotten and did not get enough focus. Organizations kept using the approach of Frederic Taylor.

During the First and Second World Wars, people working in teams was very popular compared to years before and during the World Wars.⁴ Maybe one of the reasons was that there was a clear, common enemy, and politicians focused in their speeches on creating team-oriented feelings: “Us against them” and “We need to stand together.” Additionally, during those dark years, people probably also preferred to work together, as it was a difficult time, and it was easier to face the problems together as a team.

Also, men were needed to fight the war. The jobs of the men who left for war needed to be done by those left behind. This created experience/knowledge gaps. Part of the solution was to work in teams and help each other bridging the gaps—an example of one of the benefits of working with teams. Knowledge transfer and the collective knowledge of a team began to solidify why teams were beneficial.

In the early 1980s, the teamwork concept grew again. It was mainly driven by management innovation. For example, car manufacturers had, until then, an individualistic work environment. Volvo experimented with a new approach, introducing teamwork in an assembly line environment. Car assembly lines had previously applied an individual approach. Everyone who worked would just complete a small part, and the car moved to the next worker. Volvo decided to have a team of workers, working together to complete a car—not just a small part, but to deliver the whole car a team. The early adopters’ initial success spread, and many organizations aimed to adopt it.⁵

Nowadays, the common mindset is that teams are the basic building

block of business organizations. There is a lot of research and books available on how to best set up a team, which is followed by ongoing innovation to improve upon team collaboration and performance.

One survey found that sixty-eight percent of the *Fortune* 1,000 companies are using self-managing teams.⁶ Teams are *self-managing* when they have full responsibility for organizing their work and work processes and are responsible for creating the value requested. There is no manager telling the team how to do the work.

In another survey, research suggested that shifting toward an organizational where teams are the basic work unit improves performance, often significantly. (We will of course be exploring these models throughout the book.) Seventy-four percent of the respondents reported improvement in performance in transitioning to a team/network-based organization. This shift to a team-based organization is paying off for many organizations. Cisco and Google are great examples of organizations that work in a team-based organization and are actively promoting teaming and networking within their organizations.⁷

A common reason for using teams is that teams are seen as able to deal with the current global complexity we see whereas individuals are not.

As usual, this rule doesn't always apply across the board. In the *Harvard Business Review* article "When Individuals Are More Innovative Than Teams," the authors explain the success of a team versus individual also depends on the innovation required.⁸ *Design innovation* (innovation in form, such as a distinct visual configuration or ornamentation of a product) can better be done individually, where utility innovation (innovation in function, such as for a product, process, or machine) can be better done by teams. For example, an author can write a book, but he will need a team to, in the end, publish and make the book successful.

Many organizations realize the shift from *functional hierarchy* to

team-centric and network-based organizational models is important. Organizations who are organized like a pyramid, where every decision must go through many layers and up to the top of the pyramid, are too slow and inflexible in the current, fast-changing times. Organizations where teams are self-managing and can interact with other teams, not bound to the pyramid, are able to deal with the fast-changing environment of today.

However, that's easier said than done. Switching to a team-based organization is not easy. Implementing a network-based organization and introducing self-managing teams will affect many parts of the organization—for example, leadership, management, performance management, goal setting, and rewards. Only a small number of organizations feel ready to shift to a team-based organization. Even a smaller number of organizations think they are very effective at managing (cross-functional) teams. Making the shift to a team-based organization and creating a high-performance organization is still difficult and challenging.

Summarizing the History of Teams

Teams or groups have existed for millennia. As I mentioned, I will discuss the difference between groups and teams later in this book. People have worked in teams already for many millennia, but organizations have forgotten the value of teamwork many times over the last century. During difficult times, however, people have realized the importance of teams again, like during the world wars. And in the last fifty years, teams started to become popular again in the context of management innovation. Nowadays, teams are the basic building block in many organizations. Many successful organizations like Cisco and Google are promoting “teaming” in their organizations. However, many organizations are still struggling to make the change to a team-based organization.

CHAPTER 2

WHEN DO YOU CALL A TEAM A TEAM?

Would you call elephants who wander the savanna together a team? What about a wolf pack? What about a school of tuna? Or what about tens of mosquitoes that are flying around you when you walk in a forest? Sometimes we say immediately, *yes, of course, that is a team*. And sometimes, it is so clear that a group of individuals is *not* a team.

This book is about *teams*. To be clear, it is not about Microsoft Teams, a business communication platform developed by Microsoft. It is also not about sports teams.

A note on sports: People sometimes compare teams in organizations with sports teams. I am not sure if this is a fair comparison. A sports team is usually working on becoming the best team possible. They have the best players possible, a very clear focus, and typically a game once a week where they need to perform. A team in an organization often needs to perform every working day, not just once a week. They don't have the luxury of training five days a week with a professional team of coaches to guide them in many different skills.

This book is specifically about *work teams*. To keep it simple, however, I will just talk about *teams* and leave out the word *work* in most cases.

Before I continue this book, it is useful first to define more formally what

a team is. What is the difference between a group and a team, for example?

First, let's ask the dictionaries. *The Oxford Learner's Dictionary* describes teams as "a group of people who play a particular game or sport against another group of people" or "a group of people who work together at a particular job." In this case, let's go for that second definition: "A group of people work together at a particular job."

Using this definition, you are a team if you get together for one hour with five people (you've never met) from your neighborhood to clean up the playground. Yet this doesn't feel like a team, getting together with people you hardly know, to do something together for just one hour. For me, and probably most people, this is not the typical definition of team.

According to *Lexico*, a team is "two or more people working together." This feels a bit the same as the previous definition. So a team is at least two people working together for 30 minutes? Dictionaries help us in the right direction, but sometimes you need more context to explain a concept or word.

Most researchers, such as the psychologist Steve W. J. Kozlowski and Bradford S. Bell,⁹ a professor in strategic human resources, don't differentiate between groups and teams. In their opinion, work teams and groups should have the following traits. They should:

- Be composed of two or more individuals,
- Exist to perform organizationally relevant tasks,
- Share one or more common goals,
- Interact socially,
- Exhibit task interdependencies (i.e., workflow, goals, outcomes),
- Maintain and manage boundaries, and
- Be embedded in an organizational context that sets boundaries, constrains the team, and influences exchanges with other units in the broader entity.

I, however, believe there is a difference between groups and teams. A group exists when you can be successful without the direct need for the other people within it. For example, if you are a recruiter assigned to a department, you need to hire people for the open positions in the department. You could work together with other recruiters who are assigned to other departments. You could learn from them, maybe help them with questions on tooling, ask for a second opinion. However, in the end, you can be quite successful without the support of the other recruiters. A group exists when different recruiters from different departments work together where and when possible, but they can all be successful without the direct support of other recruiters.

There is almost no individual or team that isn't part of a bigger system. There will always be an outside constraint or boundary that influences the team. This could be a business unit, large enterprise, customers, or even government.

Google re:Work¹⁰—an effort by Google and others to help share and push forward the practice and research of data-driven HR—uses a different definition of team, and they do distinguish between groups and teams.

- They define a group as having *the least amount of interdependence possible*.
- A team is composed of people who are *highly interdependent upon one another*. They plan work, solve problems, make decisions, and review progress in service of a specific project. In short, team members need one another to get work done.

Another distinction Google makes is that groups are based on organizational or managerial hierarchy, whereas teams exist for a project. I don't see why a team could not also be based on organizational hierarchy. A

customer support team based on the organizational hierarchy could also act as a team, in my opinion. They can have goals, make decisions, and work closely together.

I also like the fact that Google mentions that team members need one another to get work done. Remember the recruiters? They don't need each other to be successful and are therefore a group.

Gordon Curphy, leadership and senior teams expert, and Robert Hogan, an expert on leadership, teams, and organizational effectiveness, also distinguish between groups and teams in their book *The Rocket Model*.¹¹ They use the following definition for a team:

1. Works toward a common set of goals
2. Works jointly; team members' performance is interdependent
3. Shares common leadership
4. Shares a common fate that depends on the performance of a team
5. See themselves as being part of a team with common goals and shared fates

And they state a team can consist of three to 25 people. I will explore more about team size in the next section, but in their opinion, a team should be at least three people. The interaction between two people is not complex enough to be referred to as a team.

I think Curphy's and Hogan's definition is too complicated, at least for me. I agree on their first two points, but not on *shared common leadership*. Are they talking about real leadership or management? If they mean management—as leadership and management are often used interchangeably—why can't a team not have different managers? There are many successful teams where team members have different managers. When they refer to being inspired by leadership, that, for me, is already described

in their first point. Also points two and four feel strongly entwined for me. Also points five, four, and one have something in common for me. Overall, I think the definition can be simpler.

I believe that it is possible to make a good, new, simple, definition that considers all the other theories introduced here. I propose to define *team* as:

- **Possessing one or more shared common goals.** In a perfect team, all team members are aware of the goal(s).
- **Needing one another to accomplish the team goal(s).** There is a high interdependence on each other to realize the team goal(s).
- **Sharing success or failure as a team.** If the team succeeds, all team members will get the credit, and the other way around. When a team succeeds or fails, not just a few team members will be successful or not successful.

Summarizing the Definition of Teams

As we've discussed, there are many different definitions of teams. Some distinguish between groups and teams—defining groups as more loosely connected than teams. Every definition adds a new view on teams. If I combine different definitions and look at the parts that are most commonly found with definitions of a team, I end up with the following definition: The team has one or more shared common goals, team members need each other to accomplish the team goal(s), and the team succeeds or fails together.

Reflect

Take a few minutes and think about your team. Look at the definition of team just introduced and compare it to your team.

1. Can you describe your team goal within 30 seconds? Can any team member describe the team goal within 30 seconds? If not, why not? Is there not a team goal, or is it too complex to understand and articulate?
2. Which team member could go on holiday for six weeks and not impact the outcome of the team? If one or team members can enjoy a six-week holiday, why are they part of the team? Are they needed to make the team successful?
3. When did you as a team celebrate a success for the last time? Or who was blamed for the last mistake made by the team? Did the team get the credit and/or the blame—or the individuals?

CHAPTER 3

WHAT IS THE OPTIMAL SIZE OF A TEAM?

In some organizations, the manager's status is determined by the number of people who report to the manager. The more people who report to that manager, the more respect they earn. As a result, the manager tries to get as many reports as possible in his team. This increases the manager's status and probably also their salary.

However, I hope we all agree that the number of people on a team should not be driven by managers trying to increase their status. Some people believe that adding more people to a project will speed up the project. This could certainly be true if you are digging a canal. However, still in that case, only a limited number of people can work on the same square meter. In 1975, Fred Brook, a software engineer, described in his book *The Mythical Man-Month*, what we nowadays know as Brook's law: "Adding human resources to a late (software) project makes it later." Or, as some people say, *nine women don't deliver a baby in one month*.

Team size does influence your project. I think I can say we all agree on that. This conclusion was also confirmed by the research of psychologist Ivan Steiner, as described in his book, *Group Process and Productivity*.¹² He concluded that the potential productivity of a team increases as the number of team members increases. However, the benefit of that increase

quickly drops when you keep adding additional people. Once the group is saturated with too many people, productivity will seriously suffer because of the team size.

In my workshops and when working with customers, we often discuss team size. A question we often discuss is: How big should a team be? A football team has 11 players, a rugby team has 15 players, and a basketball team has five players. So maybe it depends on the context? Let's take a look at some theories.

Some people are familiar with a statement by Jeff Bezos. In the early days of Amazon, he stated that a team should not be larger than what two pizzas can feed. As far as I know, there is no real data or science behind this statement. It probably also depends on where you order your pizza and what size the pizzas are. However, in general, this would be a team of fewer than ten people.

Dave Snowden, a complexity thinker, shared his view on team sizes in a blog post.¹³ He talked about numbers five, 15, and 150. He referred to the Dunbar number, stating a group of people should be less than 150. According to Dunbar, people can maintain 150 stable relationships—the number of people some people would invite for a large party. You can remember their names, backgrounds, what they do for a living, family situation, etc.

However, thinking back at Brook's law and common sense, I dare say with some confidence that a work team of 150 people is not an option.

Secondly, Dave Snowden talks about the number 15. There is research that you can have a maximum of 15 good friends—people you can call when you have serious problems. You could argue, therefore, that 15 would be a good number for a team. However, you could easily come close to saturating the number 15 just with friends and family, leaving very few openings for people on your team. Using this number for team size does not make any sense, since you will probably never work with

a team that includes only people you will and can call when you have serious problems. There will also be people outside of work, or maybe all will fall outside of work, within that group of 15.

The number five also comes up in discussions about teams. We often mention five as the maximum number of really good friends, people you can trust with everything. How many really good friends do you have? Probably five or less. However, this number also doesn't really make sense in the context of team sizes. Again, those five people are probably not your colleagues. Therefore, the well-known social numbers of 150, 15, and five are not useful for team sizes.

Scrum is a framework for developing and sustaining complex products. In the *Scrum Guide*, it is written that a Scrum team should remain nimble and large enough to complete significant work within a Sprint. While they say it is typically 10 or fewer, there is no minimum number of team members.¹⁴ In my experience, the minimum number of team members in a Scrum is often four people. You will probably lack one or more skills, or Scrum roles, to deliver value with fewer than four people.

Also, Scrum is intended to be used for complex adaptive problems. Those kinds of problems often require different types of skills. Can teams of fewer than four people have all the skills to solve these problems? If yes, would a team of three be a good idea? Even if the necessary skills were represented by three people, can they also fulfill all the roles described by the *Scrum Guide*: the product owner, Scrum master, and developers?

According to the *Scrum Guide*, a team is typically 10 or fewer people. It mentions that smaller teams communicate better and are more productive. Thus, large Scrum teams should consider reorganizing themselves into smaller teams. However, they don't mention what a small team is. Teams of 10 or more team members will require too much coordination. Additionally, more than 10 team members will also introduce too much complexity

for an empirical process to be useful. You will need more synchronization of work, more information that needs to be shared, more team bonding. It is just harder to get a large team of, let's say, 15 people to work as well as a small team. However, I know for sure there are Scrum teams with more than 10 team members who deliver value and make customers happy. It just takes more work to get it right when a team is this large.

J. Richard Hackman, professor of social and organizational psychology, researched teams. He's written many papers and books about teams and has also looked at the optimal size of teams. In 1970, Hackman and Neil Vidmar, social psychologist, conducted research¹⁵ to determine the perfect team size. They set up a test and asked teams of different sizes to do several tasks, simple and complex. The teams had between three and seven team members. In the end, they asked all participants for feedback on how they experienced the team's cooperation and size, etc. They wanted their perceptions on how well they worked together. Hackman and Vidmar discovered that people could be highly competitive, and in large teams, get into disagreements more easily. People in the small teams felt more personally involved. They perceived that their opinions really mattered, and they felt they operated more efficiently than as large teams. They concluded that the most optimal team size is four or five people.

However, they also concluded that the question of what the "optimal" team size is a complex one. Complex questions don't have a simple answer. You can't say four or five is *always* the correct team size. It depends on the assignment, maturity, organization—as elephants also do not always have the same exact number of animals in their herd.

On the website Intuitor.com, you will find a blog post on team sizes.¹⁶ Intuitor.com is a website maintained by three guys who are addicted to learning. By using data and statistics, they looked at the team's decision-making process and communication in relation to the number

of people on the team. More people on a team implies more knowledge. On the other hand, more people on a team also requires more communication. To represent communication, they use the following formula:

$$S_{x=2}^n = \frac{n!}{x!(n-x)!}$$

No worries, I don't expect you to understand this formula. However, the outcome is valuable to consider. With two people, only one social interaction is possible. With three people, three possible two-person interactions exist, etc. As a result of increasing the number on a team, the number of interactions grows exponentially. A team of six people already has 50-plus two-person interactions!

They also looked at decision-making accuracy. Using data and making some basic assumptions, they concluded two things:

1. Teams with an even number of people have a lower probability of making the correct decision. These teams can end up in a tie, and therefore sometimes they may not come to a decision.
2. Teams with more than five team members don't show a better decision-making rate.

If you combine Hackman and Vidmar's research, the conclusions of *intuitor.com*, you could argue that the perfect team size is five people. However, let's above all also remember the conclusion of Hackman and Vidmar: The question of the "optimal" team size is a complex one. Sometimes maybe seven will work better for you, sometimes four.

So how do you decide how many should be on your team?

- A starting point can be to *make sure you have the minimal skills in the team to create value for your stakeholders.*
- The next step is to start experimenting and learning to *find out what works best for your team.*

Summarizing the Optimal Size of a Team

There is a lot of data, opinions, and papers on team sizes. I believe it is safe to conclude that a team should never have double digits. I also believe that two people can deliver great things, but often you need more people on a team. The research of Hackman and Vidmar tells us a team should be four or five. The research done by Intuitor concluded a team should be five. I am aware that Intuitor made some assumptions to simplify the calculation model. However, I still believe their conclusions add value to deciding on the size of teams. If I combine the different opinions and research, there is only one number for the team's optimal size: five.

However, I agree with Hackman and Vidmar. The question of the “optimal” group size is a complex one, and complex questions often don't have a single answer. I therefore can't tell you what the most optimal team size is for your team. If I could, I would be rich and I would never write this book to tell you. The truth is you need to discover it yourself. You need to experiment and try things out. One extra team member can sometimes make a substantial positive or negative difference. Start with five people, if possible, and experiment and learn what works best for you. Will one more person make the team more successful while keeping communication simple? Or will two additional people make the team more successful, as they are less dependent on other teams?

Reflect

Let's reflect on team size. Keep your current team in mind, or a team that you work closely with. Answer the following:

1. Who decided on the current size of the team? Do you know what the arguments were for this team size? Do those arguments still make sense? Does the team agree with the current size?
2. Take a paper and write the names of all team members. Link all team members with each other, with a line between every team member. How many lines do you count? How many extra lines will you have to draw, or can you delete, with one team member more or less? How would you value the quality of the communication per line—with 1 being *no or difficult communication*, and 5 being *optimal communication*. What do you see? Does it surprise you?
3. What is the minimum team size required to still create value for your stakeholders? Do you really need so many team members, or could you split teams?

HOW DO VIRTUAL TEAMS WORK?

Who could imagine after COVID-19 was getting known to the world in December 2019 that four months later almost all office workers around the world would work from home? I dare say no one. Virtual working and virtual teams have been around for decades, but they have grown enormously in the last five years. COVID-19 just made their growth faster and forced nearly everyone to experience virtual working.

Virtual teams are only possible because of the many online tools available and high bandwidth internet. Imagine how virtual teams would have worked together 10 years ago. It would not have been possible without the tools and internet connections nowadays to support video conferencing and more.

Everything in this book also applies to virtual teams. However, a virtual team is unlike any other team. There are two important components, which I will discuss in this chapter pertaining to virtual teams.

Virtual teams, for the purpose of this discussion, are those that are geographically distributed and need telecommunications and other tools to work together. They rarely meet in person.

Virtual, Distributed, or Remote?

Is there a difference? Yes, and I will describe the distinction.

The definition of *remote* is: “(of a place) situated far from the main centers of population; distant.” For example: “The valley is remote from the usual tourist routes.” Remote assumes you are (far) away from the office. You work remotely when you work from home (or from your friend’s house, or from your beach hut, or... you get it). However, *working remotely* for purposes of this discussion means you are not in the office where your colleagues work. When there is an office where most people work, but you don’t, you work remotely.

How about when there is no one in the office because of a lockdown? It could be because of COVID-19 or maybe because of demonstrations, like in Chile in 2019. Or, what if the company doesn’t even have an office because all employees work from different places?

The other word I use to describe today’s non-in-person teams is *distributed*. The definition of distributed is to “occur throughout an area or spread (a load) over an area.” For example: “The birds are mainly distributed in marshes and river valleys” or “The seat is designed to ensure the passenger’s weight is evenly distributed.”

Again, let’s look at how organizations are organized during lockdowns. All people work from home, one person at every location. Therefore, people are equally distributed; there isn’t one location with more than one person. No team or multiples of people are in the office.

But this doesn’t only occur during lockdowns. The same setup exists for companies like Management 3.0 and Buffer, a social media management platform. There is no office, and everyone works exclusively from their own (home) office, no matter where it is. This setup is called *distributed*, not remote.

The other word you often hear is *virtual*. I work with many virtual

teams. The definition of *virtual* is: “almost or nearly as described, but not wholly or according to strict definition.” Looking at that definition, what is a virtual team? A team that is almost a team? Or a team that is not wholly working from one location? According to Wikipedia, a virtual team is a distributed team or remote team. The term *virtual teams* can be used for referring to both setups described: remote and distributed.

To make life simple, I will just talk about virtual teams, where they can be distributed or a remote team.

Why Would You Want Virtual Teams?

Some people believe virtual teams should be avoided at all costs. However, there are also organizations that operate with 100 percent of employees working virtually, with great success, and they would never like to go to an office again. Also called co-located, where teams work in one location.

Why would an organization set up virtual teams? Three important reasons are flexibility in hiring, globalization, and offering personal flexibility to team members in where and when to work.⁹²

As a leader or manager, I can assume that you would like to find the best team members for your teams. Perhaps you need skills that you can't find in your region. For example, in many countries there is a shortage of highly qualified workers, especially in IT. The competition to hire team members is strong, and as a result, some organizations have serious problems realizing their goals. Also, as products and processes get more complex, more specialized team members are needed. That specialized knowledge is not always available in your area. Setting up virtual teams can solve these problems, as you can look for team members everywhere in the world. You are no longer restricted to the people in your region.

The increased globalization of trade and organizations working together could require you to have team members in different areas of the world or

time zones. Having team members in Japan could make it easier for your team to work with Japan's stakeholders, for example. Also, by having team members in different time zones, some team members can be more available for stakeholders. Some teams need to deliver 24/7 support. By having team members in Asia, Europe, and America, they can provide 24/7 support without asking people to work night shifts.

Team members also are looking for personal flexibility. Some people love to travel around the world and would like to work from everywhere. Some people don't like to commute every day and would love to work from home. Other people prefer to work in different work hubs during the week to stay connected with stakeholders. Working with virtual teams can give team members the flexibility to work from anywhere.

As I am writing this chapter, many organizations are working virtually because of COVID-19. We don't know yet what the impact will be on work in the post-COVID-19 world. However, many people will expect that many teams will remain working (partly) virtually. Time will tell. However, it is a given that virtual teams will only increase in the next decade for the reasons described.

Maturity Levels of Virtual Teams

Some people experience working in virtual teams as very tiresome, with meeting after meeting, a lot of desktop sharing, and challenges in finding the right communication channel. However, I also worked in virtual environments that felt completely different. Companies like Buffer, Management 3.0, and GitHub are 100 percent virtual, and they love it!

When working with virtual teams, it is important to understand what kind of *maturity level* in your virtual work you have, a concept I created which I will describe. Working at *maturity level one* is OK, but not when you want to work with a 100 percent virtual team. *Maturity level two* is

an energy drainer, something you should avoid at all costs. Virtual teams should work at *maturity level three or four*.

Let me explain the four different levels, including some typical behaviors and tools related to it.

Level 1—Furniture Delivery

I call the first level the Furniture Delivery Level, people may work away from the office occasionally for a day as the exception. This level can be found in many different organizations. Almost all organizations allow this kind of virtual working at times. Team members work from home when new furniture is delivered, or when the heaters need a check-up, or when they would like to work undisturbed for one day.

The work done at this level can be completed offline. There is no need to be connected to the office. Tasks that can't be done virtually can wait until tomorrow when the person returns to the office. Meetings are rescheduled if the person is not in the office.

Productivity is high for the person working virtually. They can work undisturbed and clean up the inbox or finally finish that document. Colleagues in the office often accept when this person is not in and will just wait until the next day. There is often no communication during this day. I have heard people say: "You can't reach me. I am working from home." This made me really wonder which planet their home was on. However, in case of an emergency, the person can be called on a mobile phone.

Trust is not an issue with this level of maturity. Most organizations allow this kind of virtual work, as it is just one day. They are OK with the person being offline for the day.

For some reason, however, in many organizations, this is only allowed for managers and leaders but not for *regular* team members. The weird thing is that managers don't question if other managers will be productive,

but they doubt if team members will be productive.

People may work from the kitchen table or the local coffee shop around the corner. There is no home office or room dedicated to work—no office chair, second screen, etc. It's just for one day, so there is no need to set up a home office.

Tools are not a topic here. People just use the tools they've always used; there are often no extra tools available. They may take their work laptop home and use it offline.

Level 2—Office to the Kitchen Table

Level two maturity should be avoided, or it should be just a quick stop on your way to level three. Where level one is ok, level two is an energy drainer. In this level of virtual work, all tasks that can be done in the office must be done at home, without extensive setup, preparation, or considering that working virtually is different from working co-located.

This level is not sustainable and is often caused by an emergency. Many organizations were forced into level two during COVID-19. Organizations with bureaucracy also often find themselves in level two, as they don't have the power or culture to move quickly to level three. An organization should go back to level one or move as soon as possible to level three.

Level two happened to many people when COVID-19 caused lockdowns in many countries. From one day to the next, people were not allowed into the office because of the risk of exposure to the virus. They were forced to work from home. There was no orchestrated change in behavior in the way of working, no mindset change, and people were forced to try to use the same tools as in the office.

Most organizations use VPNs to connect laptops to the office network. As a result, the computer can use all software as being in the physical office. As a result, organizations don't realize there is a change in the

tools and mindset needed when working from home.

Organizations experiencing level two expect people to work from home as they would in the office: with the same working hours, meetings, and productivity. One advantage of this level is that everyone is working virtually. There is no hybrid setup, like in level one. Everyone has the same advantages and disadvantages—although people with kids and pets probably perceive this differently. Productivity is low in the beginning but will increase as people find their way around.

However, it will never be the same as in the office, as people still approach work as if they are in the office, without the benefits of being together. Most agendas are flooded with meetings, as there is no informal meeting structure anymore; meetings are scheduled one after another.

The approach to work and communication does not change in level two. This results in four unique challenges:

1. The first challenge is that *body language and facial expressions are important in communication, yet they are hard to secure without running into other problems*. To read body language, for example, people must turn on their webcams. But some webcams are not turned on, or people have bad quality headsets or a lot of background noise. People are often not used to communicating in a virtual environment and thus don't have, or are not used to, informal communication channels. These obstacles in online communications result in a feeling of disconnection from team members, and consequently many meetings are scheduled to discuss topics that are often or usually discussed at the water cooler.
2. The second challenge is that at this level, *there are no clear agreements on communication*. Does the organization use email, Yammer, Trello, Teams, Zoom, or WhatsApp as a primary

communication channel? Often, they use everything, and information is distributed over many platforms. This makes it difficult for people to communicate and find information. Also, there are no agreements on what to communicate. This can result in some people sharing everything they can, and some people sharing nothing.

3. The third challenge is that *people are flooded with online meetings, and they are scheduled one after another*. As there is no informal communication anymore, everything is discussed in meetings. Tools like Outlook make it very easy to find open spots in agendas to schedule the next meeting. As a result, it is common to start the meetings at 9:00 a.m., ending at 12:00 p.m.—with the same in the afternoon, starting at 1:00 p.m. and ending at 5:00 p.m. In an office, people have to walk to a different meeting room. This allows them to stretch their legs, get some coffee or soda, and feel refreshed for the next meeting. This is often not done between online meetings; thus, people's energy runs out very quickly.
4. The final challenge is *trust*. Trust becomes an issue at level two. The mindset is often the same as when working in the office, where people may wonder, *Why is Susan not online or answering messages for three hours?* A team has no other choice but to trust team members, but this is hard! Team members wonder why some team members are online or responding, while others disappear for gaps of time. *Are they working, or walking the dog all day?* In an office, team members can see each other, and as a result, they (believe) everyone is always productive. However, I know for sure many people in an office are hardly productive.

At level two, home offices are often not in place. People work from the kitchen table, bedrooms, or the local coffee shop. People are often not

happy about their workspace. Productivity can be difficult, as kids and pets fly through the air at home—or make their cameos on video calls. If teams are lucky, organizations will find a budget after a few months to investigate setting up home offices. Allow team members to buy a second screen, an office chair, or an external webcam, and invest in software like Mentimeter, a real-time voting tool, or Miro, an online collaborative whiteboarding platform. These changes often take a few months, or longer, because of the bureaucracy and the fact there are no budgets available at this level for an unforeseen change to work-from-home.

The default tools often used are from Microsoft. Most organizations use Teams and Office 365. Those tools are not wrong and allow virtual working. However, there are often tools that can make virtual working more fun and efficient. We will mention a few of those tools at level three.

At this level, people may share their screen to work simultaneously, and the person sharing their screen will do the typing. Documents are shared via email to collaborate. People often need to use laptops from the organization, since those computers can access the corporate network. It is not permitted to bring your own device to work.

Level 3—Using the Benefits of Virtual Working

At level three maturity, working virtually adds value compared to working in the office. People often work together in the same country or time zone. External events—a pandemic, office burned down, or riots—often trigger an organization to advance into level two. Organizations may start to realize the advantages of virtual teams and move to level three. However, in some cases, they also move back to level one. Both are OK as long as they make a decision. It is also possible to start directly in maturity level three. For example, many startups don't have an office when they start, so they work virtually together.

In level three, organizations are starting to use the benefits of virtual working. Where level two should be temporary or even avoided, level three could be more permanent. Level three is where people really enjoy virtual work, and the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

At this level, there is often no office anymore. All employees work from home or other locations. All work can be done from anywhere. Tools are all in the cloud, and the only necessities are often a laptop and stable internet connection. If employees would like to come together, they rent an office space or Airbnb. Productivity is as high as in level one, and often even higher.

The people working at level three enjoy and often choose this setup. They like the lack of commuting, are OK with not seeing their colleagues in real life frequently, and can be productive in this setup.

Organizations in level three understand the importance of clear work agreements on communication. They have clear agreements on which channels to use and how to use them. For example, they may state that no questions are asked in Trello, only updates on a task's progress, but questions are asked in Slack. They share information actively. The disadvantage of this is that it can sometimes result in information overload.

People at this level have good webcams and headsets. Webcams are always turned on, and people are aware that attending a meeting from Starbucks looks cool in a movie but doesn't function in real life.

There are no trust issues related to virtual working at this level. Team members are not judged when they are offline for a few hours. Team members always assume their colleagues have the best intentions. In level three, the focus is on value delivery or just results. If people deliver as promised, everyone is happy. If people want to take a walk or go to fitness activities during the day, that's not a problem. They can catch up in the evening, or maybe not if their work is already done. This kind of freedom is

what they like and is one reason they want to work in teams in level three.

If people like to work from home, they probably have a home office in place. They may have two or even sometimes three screens, desk and office chairs, and a professional background—not the laundry of last week. However, sometimes they prefer to work from the library or local workspace hubs. Either way, people at this level are happy with their workspace.

All tools at this level for working virtually are in the cloud and readily used. No Skype for Business, no Office 365, no Microsoft Teams—but Zoom, Google Drive, Miro, Trello, and Slack. (Yes, I am biased.) They use the tools that work for them, tools that are built to support virtual teams from day one. At this level, people share a link to a document, and all people can work on the same document simultaneously. People can use any laptop they want: Mac books, Windows laptops, or Chromebooks. As long as they have a browser, it is OK, as everything is in the cloud.

Level 4—Work Anytime and Anywhere

Level four is the maturity level with all the benefits from level three, plus more. Whereas level three assumes organizations are still located in one country or region, level four includes people who work from anywhere, any time, and any place. Examples are Zapier, Management 3.0, Automattic, GitHub, and Buffer.

Level four is the most immersed with the virtual setup. It isn't better than level three, just more extreme. Some organizations will be happy with level three, where some will take one more step.

Many things in level four are the same as in level three. However, there are some essential differences.

In level four, there is also no office. If a team wants to come together, they can rent an office space, or meet in a hotel or Airbnb.

Productivity is the same as in level three, and in some cases, even

higher. In level three, often synchronous work is still assumed. At level four, almost all work other than synchronization meetings—where people meet to discuss, for example, the next steps—can be done asynchronously. People get together in a call or through a tool like Zoom. After the meeting, team members can create value without needing to be online at the same time.

Asynchronous work requires optimal communication. Team members will inform each other actively about their work progress, impediments, and further relevant details. They use the *work out loud* approach. Working out loud is an approach used by members of a virtual organization. They are encouraged to talk about their work and publish what they do as much as possible. Short videos are recorded to explain things instead of sending long messages. A video says a lot more than 1,000 words. Slack channels, for example, are used to communicate about projects, progress, and the next steps. Working out loud is important in levels two and three, but it is an automatic habit in level four.

Trust is the same as in level three. It is not about checking if people spend enough hours behind the laptop. It's about the results and value created.

Also in level four, people work where they love to work. If they like to work from home, they probably have a home office. However, at level four, people can really work from anywhere. People often travel around a continent and work a few days from one city, and the next few days from another city, etc. Work can usually be done asynchronously. Therefore, the location and time zone are not relevant anymore.

Tools are the same as in level three. Everything is in the cloud; everything is “bring your own device.” Maximum flexibility is the name of the game.

A team can be distributed all over the world, and therefore the team can always have someone available to, for example, support customers, answer questions of stakeholders, etc. When one team member can't finish the question or task, he can use tools like Slack or Trello to inform other

team members about progress. There is no need to stay up late until the next person in the next time zone starts working. Meetings are recorded to make sure everyone can watch them if they are not able to attend.

Which Level Should You Strive for?

As with any model, the borders are a bit fuzzy. Most organizations will have parts of levels one and two, and some teams may already be at level three. However, looking at the different levels could help you to make the next step—to think about where to improve, move forward to level three, or move back to level one. Almost every level is OK, except level two. Level two is where teams can experience a lot of stress.

The Model and Virtual Teams

The TOTA model described in this book also applies to virtual teams. Virtual teams also need to have conflicts, clarity, trust, care about results, be reliable, and make an impact. However, two of these components are most important: trust and clarity.

The Challenge of Trust and Virtual Teams

Trust is often perceived as a big challenge in virtual teams. In fact, there are people who believe trust isn't possible in virtual teams.⁹³ They believe the fact everything is done virtually is a dealbreaker in growing trust between these team members. To put it simply: They are wrong.⁹⁴

Trust works differently in virtual teams compared to co-located teams. Successful virtual teams often apply the Swift Trust Theory.⁹⁵ It was first explored by Debra Meyerson and colleagues in 1996. In Swift Trust, a team assumes full trust at the start, and over time the trust is confirmed and keeps growing. Research shows that trust in virtual teams is often based on actions. As you don't see each other daily, and sometimes even

don't talk to each other daily, actions are more important than words. Co-located teams often start with just some basic trust, and trust grows over time based on interactions as well as actions.

At the start of a new virtual team, it is important to have time for non-work communication. What are team members' hobbies? What did team members do during the weekend? What books did they read? Which series do they like on Netflix, etc.? For example, you could use the practice of Personal Maps, as explained in the chapter "Successful Teams Have Trust," to help team members get to know each other. Spending time on non-work topics will help the team to grow trust faster in the beginning.⁹⁶

When a new virtual team starts, they need to set up software and hardware. They need, for example, to select software for communication, collaboration, and information sharing. Also, they need to select and test hardware. For example, do they need external webcams, headsets, and video equipment for conference rooms? It is important to get this organized as soon as possible. If software and hardware are not supporting the team, the team will have challenges to growing trust. They need to get out of the configuration mud as soon as possible. If a team is part of a large organization, often the tools and hardware are already there. In that case, they can start working on the norms (more on this in the next chapter).

It is important to have good communication in a virtual team to maintain and keep growing trust. Communication is, of course, important in any team. However, the challenge of communication in a virtual team is that it mainly needs to be done using tools like Slack, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, etc. As you can imagine, this is very different from just being in the same room with two people who can talk directly to each other and see each other. As we've explored, when using these tools, body language is often not visible, and when communicating by messages, the tone of voice and facial expressions are also not there. Additionally, when team

members work in different geographical locations, time zone differences can also affect communication. Team members have just a small overlap, or sometimes no overlap, in working hours. It is important to select the optimal tools and hardware to have good communication at the team's start. Also keep experimenting with new available tools.

Good communication norms are essential. The norms should describe what, how, and when to communicate. For example:

- Which information do team members need to share?
- Which information can be shared in private messages?
- What information needs to be shared publicly?
- When do you inform people that you have done something, etc.?

Research shows that having good communication tools and norms reduces the risks on task, relational, and process conflicts, so that virtual teams have the same experience related conflicts as in an in-person team.⁹⁷

The Swift Trust Theory, as discussed earlier in the book, assumes that there is trust from day one. However, if actions do not confirm trust, it will crumble fast. Social communication and setting up technical stuff are important actions in the beginning. However, as soon the virtual team gets itself up and running, there should be clear norms and a focus on valuable communication.

Why Clarity Is Important in Virtual Teams

Teams need clarity, as we've discussed in the TOTA model. In virtual teams, it is even more important to have clarity, as members work asynchronously. This will only be possible if there are clear work agreements in the team.

I already mentioned that norms in communication are important. I can't stress out how important it is to have those norms. Spend significant time

at the formation of the virtual team to get the norms clear. Also, keep reviewing them regularly. Your way of working will change, tools will get new features, or maybe you will start using new tools. Depending on the speed of change, I would recommend you at least review your communication agreements every three months.

Visualization of work is important. It makes a huge difference if you see 50 rows in a spreadsheet program versus 50 sticky notes on a wall. In a spreadsheet program, it takes you just one scroll with the mouse wheel to go to the end of the list. Fifty sticky notes on a wall make the concept you are illustrating much more tangible.

Visualization will contribute to clarity. It will give insights into the amount of work that needs to be done, or where all the work is centered. In a virtual team, you need to select tools that can support the visualization of work. Nowadays, many tools can support visualization in virtual teams. Tools Mural, Miro, or Jamboard can be used as a digital whiteboard.

When teams work co-located, they have informal moments for themselves—such as after a meeting, at the water cooler, or over lunch—when they can talk about sensitive topics, have fun, and maybe even engage in positive gossip.⁹⁸ They also have time without managers, leaders, and other people they don't feel comfortable around.

I believe creating transparency will promote clarity in the team. However, the risk with virtual teams is that it may not be a safe environment anymore where they can talk about anything they would like. When all members of the organization get full access to all tools and communication channels, there is no virtual place where people can have private informal conversations. There is no coffee corner where people can discuss informal topics. You could maybe call it gossip, but it's not all negative.

As I said, I believe transparency is good. However, I also believe that a team should be able to have their personal space where they can talk

about topics without worrying if someone unexpectedly can read the messages. I believe a team should be able to create private group chats/channels where they can discuss any topic they want. If you are a team lead, maybe just propose to the team they create a group channel that you are not part of. Give them the virtual coffee corner.

A Key Is Asynchronous Work

One of the most important components of a virtual team is being able to work asynchronously. Virtual teams in level four work asynchronously.

Working asynchronously does not imply some team members work during the night and some team members work during the day. Working asynchronously means that team members can work on tasks at their own pace, and there is no immediate need to communicate with another team member to make progress. Synchronization is done using collaboration tools and meetings, where all stakeholders and team members discuss progress and exchange information or next steps.⁹⁹

Since team members of virtual teams are often geographically dispersed, with different time zones and their own work schedules, working asynchronously is key to making a virtual team successful. If you have team members in different time zones, like India, Europe, and Peru, it is almost impossible to meet regularly without someone staying up late or getting up early. If synchronous communication is continuously needed to make progress, working in a virtual team can become a nightmare. Team members cannot make progress; they will get frustrated. Stakeholders will be unhappy, etc.

To work asynchronously, you must enact some preconditions.

Working asynchronously requires collaboration tools like, for example, Slack, Microsoft Teams, and virtual whiteboards. Just using email to work asynchronously won't do it. Team members need to be able to look up

pertinent information and past discussions.

The team also needs to define tasks that can be executed asynchronously. If they just define one task—talking with stakeholders, creating or executing a plan—how can they work asynchronously on such a task? It requires team members to split up their work into small tasks that can be executed without needing synchronous communication.

Finally, team members need to be empowered by the team and organization to make crucial decisions for progress. If a team member needs to get permission from a stakeholder or other team members for every step, asynchronous work is impossible.

Summarizing Virtual Teams

More and more teams will work virtually in the next few years. New communication technologies and high-speed internet make it possible. Sometimes, teams are forced to work virtually. Because for example it's hard to find people in your region and therefore you need to work with people in different parts of the world, people are done commuting every day and therefore want to work virtual, or your organization is organized virtual as they believe this is the optimal setup. The TOTA model described in this book also applies to virtual teams. However, *trust* and *clarity* will need extra focus. To make a virtual team successful, it should operate at maturity level three or even four. The team should do everything to make asynchronous work successful.

Reflect

Virtual teams, remote or distributed, are more common nowadays. In case you are part of a virtual team, let's reflect on your team.

1. What kind of maturity level does your virtual team have? Which of the four levels is most applicable for your team: *furniture delivery*, *office to the kitchen table*, *using the benefits*, or *work anytime and anywhere*? Do you want to move up on maturity, or back to level one? What would be the next action?
2. Is your team able to work asynchronously, or does the team need to be in contact constantly? Often people think asynchronous work is not possible for their team; is it? Think outside the box. What would happen if there were no communication possible for a few days? What would be needed to continue working?
3. Building memories is important for every team, but even more so for virtual teams. How do you build memories in the team? Are there any in-person team retreats? How do you grow personal relations on a weekly basis?

PRACTICES CONNECTED TO THE TOTA MODEL

There are many practices described in this book, and I had to decide to connect which practice goes with which of the six TOTA components. However, some practices can be used to support also other components of the TOTA model. For example, OKRs can also help you to create clarity and improve results in addition to showing the impact the team is making.

Here you will find all the practices mentioned in the book linked to one or more of the six components. The bold marks show in which chapter the practice was described.

Feel free to experiment. Maybe you can also use some of the practices in of the other six components. If so, please let me know.

PRACTICE	CLARITY	IMPACT	TRUST	CONFLICTS	RELIABLE	RESULTS
Scenario Thinking	X	X				
Impact Bubbles	X		X			X
Decide on Team Values	X		X	X		
Team Manual	X		X	X	X	
Ishikawa Diagram	X			X		X
Team Quilt	X					
Skills and Experience Matrix	X		X			
Delegation Board	X		X		X	
Team Decision Matrix	X		X		X	
Golden Circle		X				X
Ikigai Model	X	X				X
OKRs	X	X	X			X
Motivators		X	X	X		
Feedback Wrap	X		X	X		X
Kudos		X	X	X		X
Get to Know Your Team Members	X		X	X		
Learning Wall	X		X			X
Question Wall	X		X			X
Daily Mood	X		X	X		X
Conflict Manifesto	X		X	X		
Conflict Impact Circle			X	X	X	X
Conflict Resolution Approach				X		
Personal Conflict Approach				X		
What Is Your Superpower?	X		X		X	
Peer Review in a Team	X		X		X	X
Forecast in Ranges	X				X	X
Consent Decision Making	X		X	X	X	
Retrospectives	X		X		X	X
Stakeholder Mapping	X		X			X
Cake Poster	X	X	X			X
Success and Failure	X		X		X	X
How Happy Are You Today?	X		X	X		X

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ralph van Roosmalen lives in the Netherlands, where he studied computer science at the polytechnic university in 's-Hertogenbosch and graduated in 1997. He started his career working as a software developer for software product development companies. In the early 2000s, he realized working with people and helping to improve processes would give him greater gratification than creating software products. Over time, as he gradually switched to management, his satisfaction soared.

Ralph worked as an Agile coach, development manager, Scrum Master, test manager, and team lead during the early 2000s. He was one of the drivers in setting up a large-scale distributed Scrum product development process in a Dutch ISV in the early aughts. He has worked with teams from the United States, India, the Netherlands, and Romania.

In 2015, he founded his own company, Agile Strides, to help people and organizations take *the next step* in creating more happiness at work. He has helped many teams and organizations—supporting and teaching them to inspect and adapt frequently.

Ralph actively contributes to the Agile community, sharing his insights and knowledge by speaking at conferences and writing blog posts. In 2017, Ralph published the book *Doing It—Management 3.0 Experiences*. In 2019, he published his second book, *40+ Ideas to Spice up Your Retrospective*.

You can find more information on Ralph via his LinkedIn profile or website www.RalphVanRoosmalen.com.

WORKSHOPS AND LEARNING MORE ABOUT ART OF TEAMS

Reading this book is one step in learning about helping teams to become successful. Other steps in this journey can be had by attending an Art of Teams Workshop or doing an online training. The workshops are focused on interaction, discussing topics, and learning from other attendees. You can look for a workshop close to you or attend one of the online workshops. The online training sessions cover the different components of TOTA and will give you valuable insights in how to apply the different practices. A third option is to join the Art of Teams community, and exchange experiences with other people who also are helping teams to create value. You will get free access to the Art of Teams community!

Check out the site
www.ArtOfTeams.net
and keep on learning.