

Using teams for change

A smart investment!

Helen Zink 8 August 2025

76%

of people work in two or more teams

73%

of people work in more than
one type of team

Teams are a unit of work

Amy Edmondson (2013), a pioneering thought leader on teams, emphasises that organisations thrive or fail based on how well small groups within them work collectively, not by the capabilities of individuals within them. Organisations focus on recruiting and developing high potential and high performing individuals. But individual capability does not guarantee that teams they work in are high performing. It is the way people work together and the connections between them that count.

In the ever-increasing complexity of our environment, teamwork is the norm. A study found that 76% of people work in two or more teams and 73% of people work in more than one type of team – departmental, project, cross-functional (State of teams, 2020). While numbers vary in organisations, the common thread is that teams, not individuals, are the unit of work.

Teams are a unit of change

In change programmes, the focus is often on individuals. Espoused culture, values and behaviours are often expressed in an individual way – even aspirations of increased collaboration are expressed as individual behaviours rather than something collectively co-created. For example, “you need to collaborate more” versus “what in the wider system is enabling or blocking collaboration.”

The way organisations roll out change initiatives are often individual too. Self-study on-line courses or expertly facilitated discussions amongst random co-workers are common. The rationale being that enough people connect with and take onboard desired behaviour, which leads to critical mass, a tipping point, and ultimately organisation wide change.

While individuals do need to consider what change means to them at an individual level, it makes more sense for change initiatives to mirror how people actually work – in teams!

Benefits of team-focused change:

- Practical application - impacts of change can be applied in real life, to real work, in the collaborative way in which people work.
Teams I work with say that practical application is key – they actively push back on theoretical and hard-to-relate to idealised concepts.
- Support and resilience - collectively, team members can support and scaffold each other, working through challenge challenges and implications together.
Teams I work with report increased collective team and individual resilience, building their capability to flex and change with environment changes.

- Longevity – what a team builds together will outlast any individual, as team members move in and out.
Teams I work with talk about the value of embedded change and explicit investment in the collective induction of new team members.
- Ripple effect – how a team operates, rubs off on other parts of the organisation (O’Conner & Cavanagh, 2013).
In my work, often team stakeholders share how changes in teams I have supported have positively impacted their own roles.
- It is a smart investment – less cost per employee and overall better value for money!

Teams of teams are a unit of change

Just as high performing individuals do not imply high performing teamwork, groups of high performing teams do not imply high performing organisations. It is the connection between teams, and the connection between teams and stakeholders, that count. A concept referred to by thought leaders as “teams of teams” (Clutterbuck, 2023, Hawkins, 2025).

It is important for teams to work on implications of change within their own team. However, change initiatives should also consider teams of teams with benefits mirroring those listed above on an even larger organisation-wide scale.

Champion teams

Best practice change management suggests the use of change champions. Individual early adopters, familiar with the rational and detail of initiatives, who embody the desired change, support their peers, and role model the new way. I have been a change champion myself - it was hard work convincing others the new way is better.

If teams, and teams of teams, are a smarter and more effective way to embed change initiatives, I suggest “champion teams”! Teams selected strategically for their high level of influence within organisations, connectivity with other teams and external stakeholders, or their ability to quickly embody the new way.

“Champion teams” are identified by creating a system map, showing key connection points between teams and stakeholders. Connections might be vertical, horizontal, matrix or somewhat random, and are unlikely to represent top-down formal organisational structure.

David Clutterbuck (2023) emphasises that focus does not need to start at the top of organisations or follow hierarchy. “We can select any point in the system and examine it from there. Any point where there is potential for improved connectedness.”

Once “champion teams” are identified, what happens next?

Team Coaching

Systemic Team Coaching (see note) is a highly effective, practical way, for teams to work on how they operate within themselves, with other teams, and with their stakeholders across their system.

The approach is specifically designed to focus on the connections between elements within a system, and how they work - or don't - when combined.

David Clutterbuck (2023) argues that team coaching aligns perfectly with the concept of teams of teams due to its inherently systemic approach. He highlights four key areas of focus when applying team coaching in this context:

- Communication and co-ordination across teams of teams.
- Effective and rapid decision making across teams of teams.
- Understanding which teams need to know what.
- Understanding which teams need to be involved in what.

Smart investment

Organisations do not succeed by collecting together top performers. Nor does change stick when approached one individual at a time. Change efforts need to reflect how people actually work – in teams.

A team-based approach also brings added benefits: greater collective support and resilience, deeper embedding and longevity over time, and it creates a ripple effect that can influence other teams and parts of the organisation.

In today's complex world – where people juggle multiple teams and roles, and change is a constant – investing in the collective power of teams is not just smart, it is essential. Systemic Team Coaching is the smart way to make it happen!

Note: Systemic Team Coaching is recognised by all major global professional coaching bodies: International Coaching Federation (ICF), European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), Association of Coaching (AC). All three have professional standards and certifications specifically related to Team Coaching.

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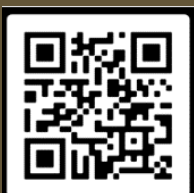
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