

## The Value of Keeping Teams Together

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Robert Huckman (Harvard Business School) and Bradley Staats (University of North Carolina) cite evidence from a number of different fields that team performance improves when team members work together over time. “Team familiarity – the amount of experience individuals have working with one another – can influence how a group performs,” say Huckman and Staats. In most cases, the less team turnover, the better the results.

This goes against many managers’ intuitive sense that teams need to be shuffled to shake things up, prevent staleness, and ensure fresh thinking. But team stability can increase trust and productivity. Huckman and Staats studied an orthopedic surgeon who was able to perform far more knee replacement operations much more quickly than other doctors in his hospital – with better outcomes and fewer complications. The key factor was that he consistently worked with two teams of nurses and anesthesiologists and their familiarity with each other made it possible to pioneer methods that made such speed and success possible.

Huckman and Staats cite positive results when teams in corporations, hospitals, the military, airliners, professional basketball, and consulting organizations work together for extended periods of time. Why? They believe five key factors are involved:

- *Coordinating activities* – Teams whose members have different specialties are sometimes inefficient because of poor communication, conflict, and confusion. “Members new to each other simply don’t understand when and how to communicate,” say Huckman and Staats. “Familiarity can help a group overcome this obstacle; once a team has learned when and how to communicate on one project, it can carry those skills over to the next.”

- *Learning where expertise lies* – Each individual brings knowledge to the team’s task, but it takes time to learn who has useful information.

- *Responding to change* – Teams have to respond to changing circumstances and new demands, and familiarity provides a common platform from which members can adapt and meet new demands.

- *Integrating knowledge to innovate* – “Innovative solutions typically come from new combinations of existing knowledge,” say Huckman and Staats. “Because familiarity helps team members share information and communicate effectively, it makes them more likely to integrate knowledge and come up with coherent, innovative solutions.”

- *Capturing value* – In a stable, cohesive team, “Each member’s performance is dependent on that of the others,” say Huckman and Staats. This means the loss of an individual won’t do grievous harm to the productivity of the group. It’s also possible that a valuable employee considering another job offer might decide to stay because of the warm embrace of the team.

What are the implications of these findings for managers? The authors recommend that leaders chart how often people work together and in what ways and use that information to maximize team consistency over time.

Huckman and Staats acknowledge that the research on teams is relatively new and there are some unanswered questions. Is there a difference in the impact of consistency between routinized tasks (such as knee replacements or piloting an airliner) versus work that requires more creativity and innovation? At what point are there diminishing returns because a team has been together *too* long? And are there situations (brainstorming, for example) where bringing in a new team member will bring new insights that will lead to greater productivity?

“The Hidden Benefits of Keeping Teams Intact” by Robert Huckman and Bradley Staats in *Harvard Business Review*, December 2013 (Vol. 91, #12, p. 27-29), no e-link available