

TEAMWORK
Is An
INDIVIDUAL
SKILL

*Getting Your Work Done
When Sharing
Responsibility*

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An Excerpt From

***Teamwork Is An Individual Skill:
Getting Your Work Done When Sharing Responsibility***

by Christopher M. Avery
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Foreword

IF YOU ARE reading this foreword in a book store, pausing for a moment after having browsed through the business management section, you are probably wondering what makes *Teamwork Is an Individual Skill* different from the other books on teamwork. Good question! The answer is that this book blends solid theory with real-world experience to create a “how-to” book from which you can start getting value immediately. That’s what makes *Teamwork Is an Individual Skill* different. But there is more to the story than this

In my current role as manager of the 3M Meeting Network, I’ve collected a lot of data about teams and teamwork. Everything I see indicates that more and more people are doing more and more of their work as part of a team. In a 1998 survey initiated by 3M, we asked 2,800 people to profile their team-related work over the last ten years. The respondents told us that ten years ago, about 21 percent of their work was done as part of a team. When asked the same question today, those same people told us that close to 50 percent of their work is done in a team. That’s a 250-percent increase over the last decade—an unprecedented change in work style.

Not only is more work being done in teams today, but there are more teams themselves. This is being driven by business trends that are happening both within and between com-

panies. Within companies we see internal groups produced by reducing levels of management hierarchy and pushing decision making down to lower levels. We read about cross-functional and cross-organizational teams and, more recently, about downsizing, or “right-sizing” (the euphemism for doing more work with fewer people) companies. These movements cause workers to wear more hats and assume more roles. The days of one person working within the comfortable bounds of an isolated, well-defined domain is almost ancient history. We are all performing multiple roles, and we must work with other people to create a whole.

We also see increased partnering and alliances between companies. The trend toward just-in-time (JIT) manufacturing, for instance, which creates tighter supplier-manufacturer relationships and dependencies, is a good example. People are paying greater attention to supply chain management, which creates tighter interdependencies between companies that are working together to get products out the door. These factors, along with the increasing numbers of joint ventures and mergers, are all drivers of collaboration and team-related activity. Whether it occurs within companies or between companies, teaming and teamwork is the mechanism—the engine—by which work is getting done today.

My role at 3M resembles that of a circus ringmaster. What I do is keep things going in different circles around me. I keep multiple—often unrelated—projects moving while watching for breakdowns and putting out the occasional fire. In my case, exercising teamwork as an individual skill means I have to use my personal skills to keep things moving.

Only rarely can you or I control the complement of resources available to us. And controlling other people is an illusion. So what are we left with? Our own behavior. That’s it. The question then becomes: “What are the behaviors and skills we can learn and exhibit that will make our teams more likely to

succeed?” This is a book about personal skills development. It’s a how-to book. Christopher Avery’s idea is that we can each learn how to be more effective in any work environment.

In this book Avery weaves together two different perspectives or worlds. The first world is the theoretical world of research on teamwork, group dynamics, management, and personal effectiveness.

The second world is the world of work. Christopher actually knows what people have to face every day in their work lives. He has read more about this stuff than anybody I know, and he also teaches it in his practice as an advisor to business. He has taken these concepts and academic theories and put them to the test as a trainer and a consultant. Working directly with people at the highest and lowest levels of organizations for the last decade has produced in him an insight that is in short supply in the business press. He knows from first-hand experience the problems people run into concerning team effectiveness, the expectations placed on them, and the lack of adequate resources. Christopher knows how to make these ideas about teams work for people. It’s weaving together these two worlds, the academic world and the work world, that gives him a unique voice. I recommend you listen to him now.

Reading *Teamwork Is an Individual Skill* can supply the edge you need not just to survive the work week, but to thrive in it.

MICHAEL BEGEMAN, *Manager*
3M Meeting Network

Introduction: Developing TeamWisdom for Personal Success

DO YOU SHARE responsibility with others to get work done but don't have authority over them (and they don't have authority over you)? If your answer to this question is "yes," like millions of other people trying to sort through the structure and dynamics of the new workplace, you can benefit immensely from the ideas and tools in this book.

Are you tired of hearing, and maybe even saying, "I got put in a bad team?" I know I am. This is the most common excuse for non-performance I hear as a business advisor, and it usually comes from highly skilled professionals! Finding oneself in a bad team is not a pleasant experience. But being in a bad team is to completely miss the point. It doesn't matter whether your team is *naturally* effective or ineffective. More and more frequently people are finding that in the new workplace they have to get their work done through a team regardless of whether that team is good, bad, or somewhere in the middle. The point here is that people need to know how to make teams work for them. This book aims to show you how.

For these and many other reasons that I will share as we go along, I firmly believe that teamwork should no longer be considered a group skill. Instead, teamwork must be considered an

individual skill and the responsibility of every individual in the organization. Why? Not treating teamwork as an individual skill and responsibility allows otherwise highly skilled employees to justify their non-performance by pointing fingers at others. This is an especially critical issue for highly capable professionals seeking to remain employable in the future.

So, who are these workers who share responsibility for getting results but don't have control over their colleagues? Here's my far from exhaustive list:

- ▶ Individual contributors who must rely on the work of others in order to get their own work done: engineers, scientists, analysts, planners, marketers, sales-people, accountants, technicians, administrators, and many others.
- ▶ People assigned to work in teams: developers, designers, creative people, coders, specialists, engineers, and scientists.
- ▶ People assigned to lead teams: program managers, product managers, project managers, team leaders, matrix managers, and technical experts.
- ▶ Managers and executives who wish to empower people within and across their direct authority.

This book is for anyone who works in an environment of shared responsibility. It does not matter whether the shared responsibility occurs in a formal team, in a hierarchical environment, or as the result of a management role. It does not matter whether the shared responsibility occurs in a public, private, profit, non-profit, or large or small organization. To sum up for a moment, I don't know anyone who *doesn't* work in an environment of shared responsibility. The truth is everyone can benefit from what I call "TeamWisdom™."

What Is TeamWisdom?

TeamWisdom refers to all the individual mental skills and behaviors that lead to highly responsible and productive relationships at work. The idea is based on my definition of “team”: A team is a group of individuals responding successfully to the opportunity presented by shared responsibility. Thus someone with TeamWisdom takes responsibility for ensuring that the group rises to the occasion, and in the process, makes sure his own work gets done and done well.

Why should you take personal responsibility for the performance of every team in which you serve?

You don't need me to tell you that we live and work in an age of increasing reliance on teams, partnerships, collaborations, horizontal processes, value chains, and webs and networks for getting things done. Your ability to create high quality, productive relationships is fast becoming the most important factor in getting your work done at all. It once was management's job to dole out individual work and then integrate the pieces. Now, organizations are doling out the work in larger chunks to teams and expecting the teams to divide and integrate the work in a manner that is most effective and efficient for them.

TeamWisdom Can Help You . . . Get More Done with Less Time and Energy

I have no interest in helping you learn to be a good and compliant *team player*. I consider that term to be an insulting label that connotes someone whose primary characteristic is compliance. Instead, my interest is in helping you make maximum use of a team of which you are a member. Use the team to get your work done and get your work noticed. Instead of thinking of yourself as a component in a team, I want you instead to think of yourself as being served by the team, which

is a *lever* for you and your abilities. That's right, my invitation is for you to learn to see your relationships at work as opportunities to leverage your talents and get results.

In my experience, people who approach every work relationship with the intention that they are going to take 100-percent responsibility for the quality and productivity of that relationship actually get more done with less effort.

How is getting more from less possible, you may ask? Synergy. Synergy is an overused term that few people accurately understand, but people with TeamWisdom understand it. The reason you can get more done with less time and energy is because any relationship that operates highly has far greater output than the individual input of the collaborators. This occurs because team members in high performing relationships do a much better job of applying the unique perspectives, information, and abilities that each member brings to the collaboration. Now, wouldn't you like to consistently do more with less and reap the extra rewards? I am convinced that if we all understood synergy better, we would be much happier when working interdependently because we would actually see that our reward can consistently be greater than our effort.

. . . Earn More

If you know how to produce synergy in a relationship, you can create employment situations where you are consistently producing more value. You know how to leverage your own value through a team (and you know how to leverage your teammates' value too).

I believe that we are not very far from the day when most professionals will be measured not on individual deliverables and output, but on how their teams perform and on how well they are able to get their work done.

. . . Attain Satisfaction

People who take 100-percent responsibility for creating quality, productive relationships at work tend to struggle less with bureaucracy and politics. Instead, they are more interested in getting work done. Responsible relationships invite people to use their expertise in the most efficient way possible. Such relationships reward your psyche and spirit, and allow you to make an impact and be acknowledged.

. . . Transform Your Workplace

By implementing the ideas in this book, you can help your organization and its members by helping yourself. Imagine a place where people do not blame others or make excuses when things go wrong. Imagine a place where agendas are aligned instead of hidden and where everyone can win instead of living in fear of losing. Everyday, through your own actions, you either reinforce the way things currently are or else demonstrate a different possibility and preference.

Understanding Hierarchies and Teams

Change consultants promote and build teams both as a means for achieving change and as a means for accomplishing work in changing environments. Because of their integrative nature, teams, we hold, are more flexible, innovative, permeable, responsive, and adaptive than are hierarchies. Teams also engender greater commitment from members who develop a sense of purpose and ownership by having a voice in what gets done.

But even teams can sometimes come up short.

Teaming can be really tough to get started and maintain. Many individuals—especially smart, high achievers—can experience great angst if asked to serve in teams. They can go to

great lengths to avoid anything that smells like a team. Like the “starter” culture necessary for making a new batch of sourdough bread, there is a “cultural ooze” required for teamwork to flourish. This general orientation is harder to engender among certain individuals and in some organizational environments.

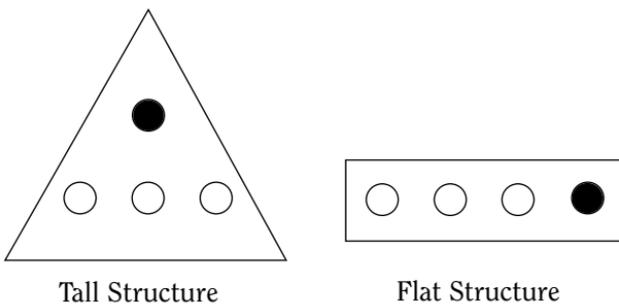
People blame the hierarchical culture, and I think it’s true that if hierarchies did not produce the familiar controlling mindset that bogs down organizational progress, there would be no need for the teams movement. Teamwork often develops naturally and easily. Just visit any playground in the world to observe that girls and boys know innately by age five how to organize themselves around a shared task. This suggests that teamwork is a natural human process, and a skillset at least partially developed at an early age in every individual.

Are Hierarchies and Teams Compatible?

I have found that images and metaphors can help when drawing distinctions between hierarchies and teams. The purpose of the illustration below is to help you begin associating “tall” social structures with hierarchical organizations and “flat” social structures with team organizations.

Consider the image on the left in Figure I.1, “Tall Structure,” to be the typical accountability hierarchy or chain

Figure I.1. Tall Organizational Structure vs. Flat Organizational Structure



of command. And consider the structure on the right, “Flat Structure,” to be the typical team where people share responsibility for a result but do not have authority over one another. The image on the left is likely to trigger our recollection of acts of authority, direction, delegation, accountability, evaluation, and performance management (all characteristics of traditional management that are respected because they get things done, but are criticized for being overly controlling and stodgy). The image on the right, on the other hand, is likely to trigger our recollection of opportunities for participation, more diverse perspectives, emergent roles, a clash of differences, consensus, empowerment, and informal task-focused feedback (all characteristics of what we like about teams).

Two questions come to mind: Is either organizational structure right or wrong? Does any organization exist as purely tall or purely flat?

My response is that there is good and bad in both structures. Although I am dedicated to understanding and developing team performance, I am not a hierarchy-basher at all. I find the hierarchy and its chain of command extremely useful. I also don’t ever recall seeing a pure hierarchy or a pure team in a collective larger than a few individuals. Every organization is obviously a hybrid of both tall and flat structures using hierarchies for role assignments, for instance, and teams (not necessarily “formal” teams) for managing complex interdependencies.

Forming Teams in Hierarchies

Although exhibiting team skills within hierarchical organizations can be difficult, it isn’t impossible. And even though individualism, competitiveness, authority and accountability systems, control, and right/wrong thinking (many of the things that have made the hierarchy and chain of command powerful) often impede the usefulness of team skill, it doesn’t mean one should throw away the hierarchy as a basic organizing structure.

Many proponents of teams do eschew the hierarchy, labeling it ancient, corrupt, and wrong, but I have seen scant few large-scale team-based companies. I have seen many large hierarchical organizations in which teams can and do flourish, however. Thus I conclude that teams and hierarchies are in fact compatible and complimentary organizing systems. And hierarchical structuring is not the only reason teams fail in some organizational systems. No, I believe that the challenges are mostly attitudinal and that they manifest themselves in these forms:

- ▶ Avoiding responsibility (as different from a preference for individual accountability, a distinction which will be addressed below)
- ▶ Right/wrong thinking
- ▶ Win/lose thinking
- ▶ Carrot-or-stick thinking
- ▶ Skill set/role thinking

I came to this position regarding the possibility of introducing team relationships within hierarchical organizations after noticing that all relationships include collaborative and competitive forces simultaneously (we respond to whichever force is perceived as greater), and after years of observing and helping to develop collaboration under competitive conditions. I am now confident that operating successfully in teams and operating successfully in hierarchies are complimentary skill sets that already exist within most professionals.

My premise is simply this: Every individual at work can be far more productive if she will take complete responsibility for the quality and productivity of each team or relationship of which she is a part. What does this mean? In brief, it means:

- ▶ You may indeed have individual accountabilities, but accomplishing these will almost always depend on successful relationships with others and their work.

- ▶ You can better attend to your own accountabilities when you assume responsibility for a larger, shared task or deliverable.
- ▶ Your success depends on teams. Teamwork is an individual—not group—skill and should be treated as such.
- ▶ Individuals make a huge difference in teams, for better or worse. You can easily learn what kind of difference you make and how to build and rebuild a team.

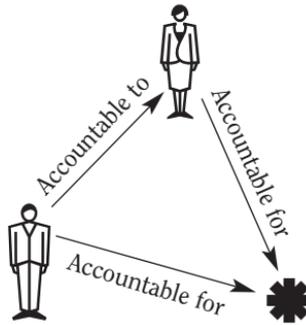
To Take Full Advantage of TeamWisdom You Must Change Your Habits of Mind

What must change so that you can treat teamwork as an individual skill, even within a competitive hierarchical environment? The single most important thing is to understand how you can take responsibility for relationships while being accountable for deliverables at the same time. To do so start distinguishing between “accountability” and “responsibility” in the workplace.

As Figure I.2 demonstrates, accountability means to be held to account *for* something, often expressed in terms of a quality and quantity of results and stewardship of resources within a time frame, to somebody. Accountability is usually negotiated and assigned through employment agreements. Any hierarchy relies in large measure on accountability. Each person occupying a position in a hierarchy is accountable for all operations performed by the people who report to that position. The person occupying the position delegates his accountabilities (without giving up accountability) to others to perform. Each person remains accountable to whomever delegated the accountability to him.

If you work in a hierarchy and are not absolutely clear to whom you are accountable (the person who evaluates your

Figure I.2. Understanding Accountability

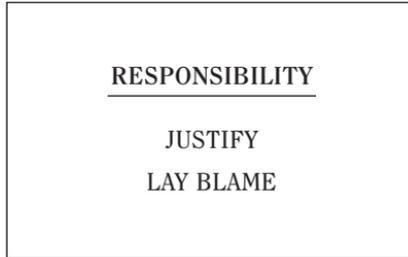


performance) and for what you are accountable (the quality and quantity of results), you may be in danger of never knowing whether or not your work is relevant. I suggest that you take responsibility for allowing this to happen and that you correct the situation.

Responsibility, on the other hand, means, literally, *the ability to respond*. One of the first things I ask of any group with whom I work is that each group member operate from the position of taking 100-percent personal responsibility for her own actions and results. The Responsibility Chart, Figure I.3 below, illustrates what I mean.¹ Below the center line on the chart are the terms “Lay Blame” and “Justify,” two behaviors human beings engage in with amazing consistency when things don’t go their way. Above the center line is an alternative. That alternative is to completely own your choices and results: “Oh, I did that. Look at my mess. Now, what can I learn from this so that I can improve and move on?” In ten years of asking thousands of individuals to operate with me above the line in seminars and in teams, no one has ever refused. Some have squirmed uncomfortably at first, but everyone has come to recognize the possibilities. Most find acting with responsibility refreshing. Some find it long overdue in their environment. Everyone finds it

challenging and appreciates being in a group that will support them in learning to operate from this mindset.

Figure I.3. Responsibility Chart



For me, the toughest thing about taking 100-percent responsibility for my results in life, including the quality and productivity of my relationships at work, is admitting that I create my own results. If I don't like my life and results, I am the only one who can do anything about it. If I want to have a different experience, it is up to me. The tough thing about taking 100-percent responsibility is accepting that I am operating from my own agency even when I attempt to deny it, blame others, or justify my poor performance with a creative story or excuse!

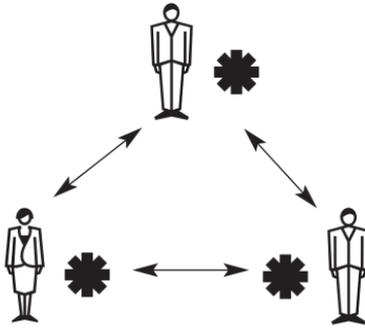
When people talk of responsibility as "taking ownership," I think this is what they mean. A person who demonstrates responsibility holds an intention for overseeing the course of some process or activity (such as a shared task). Thus "responsibility" is an internal experience. It is an urge, feeling, or mindset that facilitates the bringing about of some result.

While responsibility is an internal quality, accountability is an external one. To say it another way, accountability can be assigned, but responsibility can only be taken.

Accountability and responsibility are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are extremely complimentary. It is time for each of us in the workplace to take responsibility for relationships as

well as accountability for deliverables, and to engage in the conversations that build productive relationships at work. As Figure I.4 demonstrates sharing responsibility means recognizing and working to optimize your interdependence with all your work partners. That is, there are actions you can take to improve their results and yours.

Figure I.4. Sharing Responsibility



Amazing things happen when two or more people commit themselves to operating from a position of responsibility: Mistakes are viewed as opportunities to learn; communication approaches authentic completeness; and learning and progress happen fast. And all it takes for a group to operate from responsibility is for one member of that group to demonstrate responsibility and request it of the others.

To help you get the most out of this book, I will be that one individual, and here comes my request. As you consider the ideas that follow, ask yourself if you are willing to do your best to live the rest of your life “above the line.”

Accept Accountability for Deliverables and Take Responsibility for Relationships

The first change we can make is the way we look at our roles in organizational life. In our organizations, we divide up large tasks into smaller tasks and distribute those smaller tasks

to individuals. Whether manager or individual contributor, employee or contractor, exempt or non-exempt, we are all accustomed to taking accountability for deliverables.

People with TeamWisdom however go a step further. They back away from their task, role, and deliverables to view the interdependencies upstream, downstream, and all around them. Then they commit to taking responsibility for the quality and productivity of these relationships that will help them meet their accountabilities.

What do you have to do to develop your own TeamWisdom? The next step is to recognize and decide that you can't change anyone other than yourself. Got that? The only person that you can change is yourself. If you want things around you to change, first you must change. If you are willing to adopt that stance, you are ready to consider how to take responsibility when you do not have authority.

Responsibility without Authority

The message of this book is that your workteams and other work relationships will increase your personal productivity to the highest level possible only if you are willing to take 100-percent responsibility for the quality of each team or relationship, regardless of who has authority.

People in organizations frequently balk at taking responsibility without authority. We desire the authority to distribute and delegate tasks and deliverables to others, and we certainly don't want to depend on anyone else's performance for our rewards! Authority, we believe, is power, and the ability to get things done. But authority is not the only source of power, and there are better ways to get things done.

The most important teambuilding principle that I know, which I write about at length in this book, contradicts the notion that authority is the best way to get things done. The most important teambuilding principle I know is: *The task is the reason*

for the team. What this means is that teams are defined not by the people on them but by what the team must do. A teambuilder with TeamWisdom applies this principle in the process of constructing a team by figuring out how to organize the work so that none of the members can win individually but rather must win first as a team. This is a powerful way to get your work done. I call it “power with” and note that it is quite different from “power over” authority.

In summary, what needs to change for you to build TeamWisdom is the habit of mind that denies personal responsibility. You must be willing to own results that are larger than yourself. You must be willing to work interdependently with others. True collective leverage and power comes not from distributing and delegating accountabilities, but from collectively demonstrating responsibility for the entire result while doing your best to make your contribution useful to others.

How Do You Get Things Done without Control?

Teambuilding is simply a set of messages successfully shared among a group of people. Any individual can easily learn and practice teambuilding if she chooses. Professionals often use challenge courses, personality inventories, and other games and exercises to provoke groups into sharing this set of messages. But when such tools are used without understanding exactly why, critical communication skills can become hidden and results can appear magical. Individuals who want to get their work done through interaction with others must learn to make their wants and desires known without ambiguity and without magical thinking. To maximize team performance I recommend that team members engage in the following five conversations as the first order of business after the team has been formed:

Conversation One: Focusing on the Collective Task

If you are assigned to a team, or just want to create a team atmosphere at work, the first thing you should do is establish shared clarity about what the team was formed to do. Team-building starts with clarifying the reason for the team. It does not start with getting people to like each other better. The task itself, not the people performing the task, is the reason for the team. This is why Tom Peters' new passion for the phrase "project focus" is right on target.² What Peters means by "project focus" (and what I mean by "task") is that when work has specific beginnings, ends, deliverables, and results, people can get more focused on it. By the nature of its task focus, then, a team is temporary because that task has a beginning and an end.

Thirty years ago the academic literature describing the concept of group cohesion focused on how much group members liked each other. Today, however, the literature points more to shared interest in a common result as the best predictor of group cohesion. So the first conversation for any new team should be how to work together to accomplish something larger than any one member of the team. If you think about it, you will understand that the move from independence to interdependence begins with asking for or giving help. You will find plenty of practical advice in the following chapters on how to do that.

Conversation Two: Aligning Interests

The second conversation to have concerns members' individual reasons for contributing to the collective task (remember that commitment to other members is a by-product of having an individual stake in the collective outcome). Making sure everyone is at the same level of motivation is far more important to successful teamwork than matching appropriate skills.

Skill mix is an important issue for project management, but it isn't necessary for teamwork. Why? If members don't have the required skills, a high performance team will improvise. The same is not true for motivation, however. Every team performs to the level of its least invested member. Always. I call this "the principle of the least invested coworker." Because this principle of group behavior is not widely taught, most team members don't know how to respond when it manifests itself, and it manifests itself frequently. I figure "the principle of the least invested coworker" costs billions of dollars annually in lost productivity.

People do recognize one element of the principle, however, and that is freeloading: individuals who don't do their part. Free loaders are actually an invention of institutions. Naturally forming teams don't have them; free loaders only show up in institutionally sanctioned teams with assigned members. If not for the bureaucracy protecting each free loader's membership, the team would unload him immediately if he didn't quit on his own first.

Most professionals aren't equipped to align motivations or confront free loaders, but it isn't difficult to do. It isn't so much a lack of skill as a lack of perceived permission and responsibility. The most common excuse I hear for not addressing issues of low motivation and commitment on teams is "that's management's job." You can make it your job if you want to get more done. This book will show you how.

Conversation Three: Establishing Behavioral Ground Rules

The widely used four-phase model of team formation (forming, storming, norming, and performing), suggests that norms don't develop until phase three. You can accelerate the development of norms, however, by initiating a conversation about appropriate and inappropriate behavior in your collective effort and then enforcing those agreements.

Turn back to page 6 and look again at Figure I.1. Notice that the image on the left, the tall structure, is rife with assumptions about who can decide direction, who can judge, how communication and feedback will flow, who can and can't evaluate work, etc. That's the tremendous power of the hierarchy. The image on the right, the flat structure, has far fewer such inherent relationship guidelines (which gives it its unique power!). The third critical teambuilding conversation then focuses on how members should treat each other when working together in the team.

Whatever operating agreements are made must be policed by the team. Team members must be equipped to "call" each other on broken agreements the way baseball umpires call each batted ball fair or foul. Until employees learn the distinction between tall and flat organizational structures, and how it is in their individual and collective interest to provide behavioral feedback to teammates, most won't "call" teammates on behavioral issues. They won't because most of them believe "It's management's job." But you can make it your job.

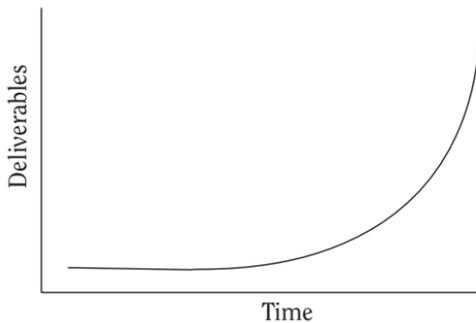
Conversation Four: Setting Bold Goals and Anticipating Conflicts, Breakthroughs, and Synergy

Unless they have experienced it a number of times, few employees appreciate and anticipate how their work on a team can lead to real breakthroughs. This lack of understanding contributes to resistance toward team activities. The fourth conversation you must have with colleagues at the beginning of team formation then is about setting bold goals, the anticipation of conflicts in working toward such goals, breakthroughs, and synergy.

When it comes to productivity, team performance corresponds to the first-half of the classic S-curve. Due to the team's flat organizational structure (shared responsibility without authority), members require time to orient themselves to each other

and to the task. Thus, performance is frequently flat for the first half of the team's investment of time and energy (see Figure I.5). After this initial period, however, breakthroughs will occur and the team's performance turns up rapidly. If you understand this pattern, you can anticipate it. The "high performance" part of teamwork is always temporary, not sustained. Teams, unlike institutionalized departments, do have beginnings and ends as their collective tasks begin and end and the high performance part of the cycle is at the end.

Figure I.5. Productivity on a High Performance Team



Conversation Five: Honoring Individuals and Their Differences

Differences in perspectives are powerful, especially when they are aimed at a collective task in an environment of trust. Team members must create explicit opportunities for each team member to participate and add value. The goal is to produce synergy through the discussion and appreciation of different perspectives. Two types of behavior kill synergy: people saying more than they know, and people saying less than they know. The fifth conversation, then, should be designed to discover what each member brings to the task and to honor differences

in perspective and approach. From this utilitarian viewpoint, diversity is not about morality. It's not even about equal opportunity as an end in itself. Diversity is about productivity, breakthrough, and synergy.

Individual contributors must learn how to stay engaged with each other under time and performance pressures. They must expect that their interactions will lead to breakthroughs that create results beyond their imaginings. More importantly, individuals must learn how to talk about these dynamic relationships in ways that create breakthroughs rather than breakdowns.

Playing a Win/Win Game in a Win/Lose World

The most compelling reason to acquire TeamWisdom skills, and my primary motivation for writing this book, is my own desire, which I have come to discover that I share with millions of other professionals, to play a win/win game at work. In my experience, it isn't teamwork that is difficult. It's initiating teamwork in a world of business that is antagonistic toward teamwork. The issue that must be addressed is that we are trying to perform teamwork within and between hierarchical organizations where a predominant feature is competitiveness—if not outright antagonism—and where win/lose intentions and results are the norm. Teamwork would be easy without the sometimes contradictory demands of the hierarchical chain of command, the politics and the bureaucracy. The issue for many in the new workplace, then, is learning how to cooperate under competitive conditions. The central question is: “How do I play win/win in a seemingly win/lose world?”

Our Metaphors Are Slow to Change

Think about this. People in organizations have been using and studying hierarchy as an organizing principle for a long,

long time. The Roman Catholic Church and the Roman Army used hierarchy to organize and manage large numbers of individual members spread out over vast areas, and studies of hierarchical organization date back to this time. The Catholic Church thrives in much the same organizational form that it has used for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Organization managers and scientists have only been exploring the use of teams for about 50 years. And it's only been 20 years since people noticed that the U.S. economy was taking a beating and began examining Japanese management techniques. When I was a new doctoral student at The University of Texas at Austin in 1982, I discovered the first three books to appear in university libraries about teams in Japan. I used them to design Quality Circle teams and team training for a Motorola facility in Austin. Those books were brand new then. The hundreds, perhaps thousands, of books about teams that you can buy today have all been written in the last 20 years.

It is interesting to watch what typically happens when a traditional organization experiments with teams. First, a big hurrah will be sounded: "We are going to teams!" Then, people get reorganized into new accountability hierarchies that look just like the old ones, except that the new ones have different labels. The team (former department) is assigned a leader (former manager). The leader is assigned the accountability. The team members (former subordinates) wait for the leader to tell them what to do so they can each do their part.

The labels may have changed, but the organizing metaphor hasn't changed at all. And I have seen this same process repeated hundreds of times. But it isn't a conscious conspiracy to keep things from changing. Managers initiate this kind of false change because they don't know any other way. They don't know what they don't know. So they re-structure and change the words, not recognizing that they are actually recreating what they say they are trying to change.

Think about it. Our images and metaphors of organization are all about authority and chain of command. TeamWisdom seeks out new metaphors.

Tired Ideas about Teambuilding

I am very concerned about the nature of teambuilding and the role of teambuilding consultants in industry. Let me conclude this introduction by briefly addressing some common practices that I find troubling.

In the table below, the left column contains the common understanding, or what I would call “mythology,” about teams and teambuilding. The right column contains my experience of the same subject, which tends to deflate the myth.

<i>Common Teambuilding Myths</i>	<i>My Experience</i>
Teambuilding is treated by both providers and consumers as <i>bonding magic</i> ; an art rather than a science, understood only by consultants who must be brought in from the outside.	Teambuilding is a series of specific communications or conversations that occur between people who could share responsibility to get something done. Anyone can have these conversations with coworkers.
If we are doing teambuilding, we aren't getting real work done. Doing teambuilding means taking time out from the real work.	Teambuilding happens in the course of work. If it doesn't happen naturally (as is frequently the case), then there are a series of conversations that people can invoke about their work in order to build the team.
The first step in teambuilding is for people to appreciate each other more (personality inventories are important to building the team).	Teams can perform well even when members don't like each other. When teams form naturally, the most likely first step is understanding what the team has been established to do, i.e., clarifying shared responsibility.

*Common Teambuilding Myths**My Experience*

Teams *get built* (by someone) and stay that way. A common variation of this myth is that the time to do teambuilding is when relationships are in high conflict.

Teams don't stay built. Many events can occur during the life of a team to break the team's healthy dynamics. An organization shouldn't depend on outside consultants to make teams happen. A better solution is for professionals who work in shared responsibility environments to learn how to build teams for themselves.

What I propose in this book is preposterous to many people. The very idea that we should think of teamwork as an individual responsibility and an individual skill set violates decades of teaching about teams. It's an idea that is easy to dismiss because it sounds so absurd. It sounds absurd for this reason: As workers, we hold a deeply imbedded belief that we are supposed to do only our part. We aren't supposed to take responsibility for the whole team being successful. "That's not fair!" we say.

I, of course, maintain that you should take responsibility for the whole team being successful. If this sounds absurd, so be it. I have to admit that I am somewhat attracted by the absurdity. With the TeamWisdom skills you will learn in this book, you can be absurd yourself and make a difference in the way you approach your work. You can make yourself invaluable to your organization no matter what your technical expertise, and you can use teams to get your own work done.

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by Christopher M. Avery

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