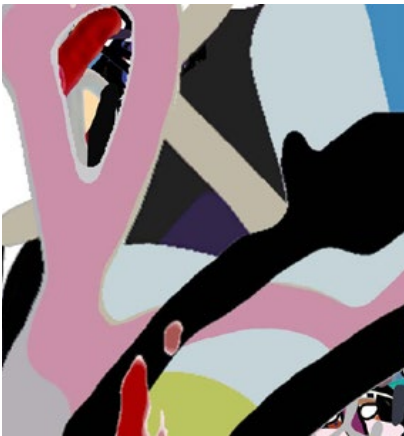




Leading **cross-functional** teams

Five critical success factors for crossfunctional team leaders



Didier Avril, série Storytelling

Our sources

This synopsis is based on the publications presented below and on the back page.

Business without boundaries
Don Mankin, Susan G. Cohen,
Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Tools for team leadership
Gregory E. Huszco, Davies-Black
Publishing, 2004.

At some point in their careers, managers increasingly find themselves placed in charge of coordinating a cross-functional team, that is, a team composed of individuals who belong to different departments of the company. In fact, this mechanism appears to effectively address the organization's need to break down silos and become more responsive. Indeed, cross-functional teams appear to be an ideal way to assemble just the right skills needed to accomplish a specific objective on an ad hoc basis. However, to be successful, the team must get people often from very different backgrounds and scattered locations to collaborate effectively outside traditional reporting lines!

Five messages for cross-functional team leaders emerge from the writings of those who have carefully studied the successes and failures of such teams:

- **Focus on building a closely-knit team, rather than on assembling the most brilliant people.**
- **Don't underestimate the effort required to establish a clear and shared direction.**
- **Be careful to share responsibility for decisions with the entire team.**
- **Work to establish and maintain a high level of trust within the team.**
- **Beware of the risk of cutting the team off from the rest of the organization.**

In this synopsis...

- 1 A difficult role
- 2 Five key success factors

1 A difficult role

Cross-functional teams are more and more commonplace. This organizational practice, which consists in entrusting a mission or a project to a small group of individuals from different functions or departments of the organization, can be extremely helpful in attaining some important objectives. These objectives include, for example, coordinating a process from end to end, addressing

Coordinating a cross-functional team creates very specific management challenges.

problems from a cross-functional or international perspective, breaking down organizational silos, coordinating geographical regions, responding to specific challenges on an ad hoc basis, etc. At some point in their careers, managers therefore often find themselves entrusted with managing teams composed of members in scattered locations who report to different departments of the organization.

However, successfully leading such a team is no small feat. Compared to managing people in a traditional hierarchical context, several features make this task particularly complex:

- The team is composed of people who often have very different profiles, as a result of their professional background or geographical origin;
- Team members are not used to working together;
- Team members are often torn between their role in the team and their normal responsibilities;
- Team members are often geographically dispersed, sometimes at the four corners of the globe;
- Finally, the team leader generally has no formal authority over the team members.

Moreover, management expectations are frequently high, for these teams are often constituted to resolve important or pressing issues. This context often puts cross-functional team leaders in the spotlight.

How, then, can cross-functional team leaders put every chance on their side?

2 Five key success factors

Many researchers and consultants have studied the prerequisites for making cross-functional teams successful (Figure A). They emphasize that the real value of such teams lies in the pooling of complementary expertise, which produces a better result than the mere sum of what each participant could have achieved separately. However, combining diverse skills is not easy. The selected publications underline five key factors required to be successful in this endeavor:

- A balanced team structure. The point is not simply to assemble expertise, but to select the personalities of the team members carefully to ensure they can work well together.

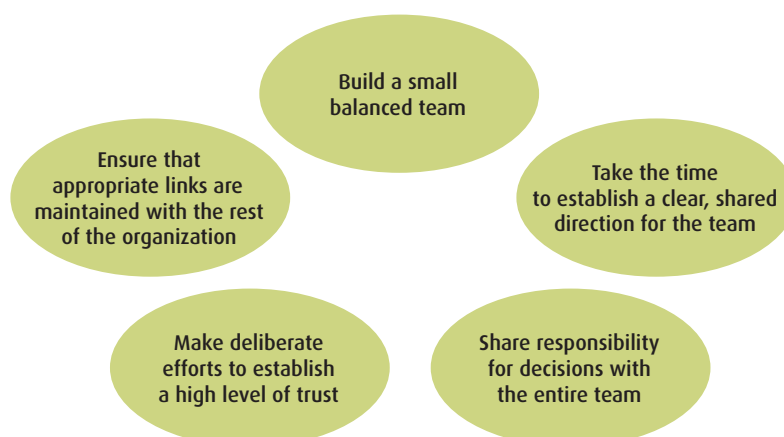
- **A shared direction.** Establishing a common framework for the work to be done is an absolute prerequisite for efficient collaboration among individuals from different backgrounds.
- **A sense of shared responsibility.** To ensure the commitment of all participants, the leader must be careful to share responsibility for results with the entire team.
- **A high level of trust.** Deliberate efforts are required to establish the level of trust needed to engage all team members and ensure high-quality discussion.
- **Proactive management** of links with the larger organization. However unified and dynamic the team, bad surprises may lie in store if it is cut off from the rest of the organization. Care must therefore be taken to ensure that enthusiasm for the project does not blind team members to the needs of the other parts of the company.

We shall now examine each of these key success factors for crossfunctional team leaders.

► A small balanced team

Team leaders are rarely alone in deciding who will be on the team. However, they usually have influence over this decision, and must therefore use it to attain one key objective, i.e. maximizing chances of creating an effective team dynamics. To do this, the following parameters must be taken into account:

FIGURE A Five key success factors for cross-functional team leaders



Complementary personalities

When building a team, we naturally try to gather the expertise needed to address the problem at hand. However, we often neglect another important dimension, i.e. the different personalities involved. A number of studies

Collective momentum must take precedence over individual skills.

have pointed out the importance of bringing together individuals who can fill different types of roles—some who push thinking off the beaten path, for example, while others ensure the feasibility of adopted solutions. **Figure B** offers several recommendations on this point.

Human qualities

Ideally, the team should be composed of people gifted for interpersonal

relationships, who inspire trust and are able to listen to others while constructively asserting their own views, etc. Although it is generally difficult in practice to meet this ideal—for example due to the need to include a specialist, even though the concerned person may be very shy—two qualities appear to be fundamental:

- **Empathy.** To be engaged in the team, the various members should feel that they are heard and understood. Otherwise, they will probably find it unbearable to be criticized or have their ideas rejected just because their ideas have not been taken into full consideration.
- **Integrity.** Trust is indispensable to the success of the team. People must be counted upon to share their views openly, keep their promises and take account of the points of view of those absent from the discussion.

Despite other possible strengths, anyone lacking these two qualities may well do more harm than good to team performance.

Size compatible with collective discussion

To perform well, the team must have deep and intense discussions, which is not possible when it is too large. The ideal team should therefore contain between five and ten members, or twelve at the most. Nonetheless, there is a natural tendency to build a large team, due to the desire to include all helpful expertise or ensure that the various concerned parts of the company are represented. In this case, it may be more efficient to limit the team to a small “core group” and involve other people as external liaisons or by forming sub-committees.

FIGURE B Nine roles for a high-performance team

Research by Meredith Belbin highlights the importance of balancing various personalities within the team. In particular, including only the most brilliant individuals on a team is a sure-fire recipe for failure! It is important to include people who are likely to fill the nine roles described below in a balanced manner. This does not need to be a rigid allocation, since several roles can be played by the same person, simultaneously or successively over time.

ROLE	FUNCTION IN THE TEAM	CORRESPONDING PERSONALITY TYPE
Coordinator	Ensures that the efforts and strengths of team members are used optimally with regard to established objectives.	Respected, calm, confident, able to direct people non-aggressively.
Shaper	Helps the team see where it is going, helps give shape to its efforts to keep things moving forward.	Dynamic, high energy, extroverted, impulsive and impatient, stimulated by obstacles.
Implementer	Translates ideas into concrete tasks for which the team members can take responsibility.	Disciplined, reliable, calm, efficient methodical.
Monitor (or Evaluator)	Validates the feasibility of solutions, alerts the team to the risks of drifting off course.	Good judgment and critical analysis ability, very objective, sometimes lacks tact.
Innovator (or Planter)	Suggests new ideas and creative solutions.	Intelligent and imaginative, often awkward with others and not always pragmatic.
Resource investigator	Spontaneously ensures the interface between the team and the rest of the organization, thus providing feedback to the team.	Extroverted, enthusiastic, communicative, very sociable, positive, often changeable and scattered.
Team Worker (or Support)	Encourages and helps the other members. Fosters team harmony and unity.	Sensitive to others, sociable, loyal, flexible in relationships.
Completer (or Finisher)	Continuously reminds people of the need to advance in a disciplined manner and pay attention to the details.	Hard worker, conscientious, worrier.
Specialists	Contribute specialized expertise that can be critical to the success of the team.	Strongly attached to professionalism in their domain of expertise.

► A clear, shared direction

To mobilize energy efficiently, a clear and shared direction must be established for the team. Many leaders underestimate this need, especially if the team includes brilliant individuals. Indeed, the leaders of such teams often suppose that the objectives and methods are obvious to everyone. Yet, studies show that the lack of clear direction is a common pitfall, and highly detrimental to performance. The authors of *Top Teams: Why Some Work and Some Do Not* even cite this as the principal factor differentiating top teams from others.

Several pieces of advice emerge from the various studies on this issue:

Spend time developing a shared vision

The first task of a good leader is to help the team adopt a shared vision of the pursued objectives and how to get there.

The team must be willing to invest the time needed to do this well. Indeed, arriving too rapidly at a consensus is often a sign that very different visions are actually masked behind vague statements. As soon as concrete work begins, misunderstandings become apparent, and are even more destabilizing because the team members originally believed they shared the same

approach. It is therefore important to avoid plunging in too soon, and to take the time to talk things over thoroughly. The authors of *Teamwork Across Time and Space* encourage teams to start discussions around a few basic questions, such as: What are our priorities? Is our goal realistic? Who will be our

Sufficient time must be taken to develop a shared direction for the team.

most dangerous competitors in three years? Etc. Any frustration about wasting time on general discussion will be largely compensated by the subsequent efficiency of the team.

During this process, the team must be truly taken into hand. Many leaders fear being too directive, out of concern for fostering open discussion and consensus. However, the team must first be put on the right path. In addition, despite the importance of taking account of all points of view, a clear direction must eventually emerge—even if this means reminding people of what is non-negotiable if necessary.

Collectively define the operating rules

It is extremely helpful to ask the team to establish the rules of the road,

such as attendance at meetings (timeliness, interruptions), transparency (freedom of speech, sharing personal observations concerning the behavior of other team members), modes of communication, rules for conflict resolution, etc. Many managers shrink from this idea, fearing it will be perceived as treating the members like children. Yet, experience shows that this exercise is valuable in more ways than one. Most importantly, it helps establish a shared framework for the team. It also reinforces the feeling of shared responsibility, by allowing any member to recall the rules if someone breaks them. Finally, it makes the team more efficient, by minimizing unproductive behavior.

Create simple tools to support discussion

Deep debates on the vision are not enough to define a common language for discussing everyday issues. One useful way to accomplish the latter is to define simple tools for expressing ideas, so that everyone understands the same thing, regardless of origin. For example, quality management teams at Lafarge draw a grid to make the link between the marketing definition of customer needs, e.g. “easy to install”, and how this definition is translated into technical characteristics.

FIGURE C Establish the rules for making decisions

Collectively defining the rules for making decisions is an effective way to combine shared responsibility and effective decision making. To do this, it can be useful to draft a list of the various possible decisions and of examples of recent or future decisions, and then ask the respective members how they think each type of decision should be made. This discussion can help establish the rules the team wants to apply.

EXAMPLES OF WAYS TO MAKE DECISIONS AND CORRESPONDING RULES

The decision is made autonomously by one member of the team	The decision is made by the leader without consulting the whole team	The decision is made by the consensus from the entire team	The decision is made by the leader after consulting with the whole team
- When the member in question has clear expertise. - When the stakes are very or relatively low. - When it would be too difficult to share required information across the team.	- If the problem concerns only certain team members. - If the stakes are moderately high. - If the required skills seem to be present.	- If the problem is important and complex. - If combining different points of view is important to the quality of the decision.	- If hearing diverse points of view is helpful in making the decision. - If the stakes are moderately high. - If the stakes are high, but discussions lead to an impasse.

Based on *Power Up*, David L. Bradford et Allan R. Cohen, John Wiley & Sons, 1998.

Establish and maintain shared workspaces

When team members work in the same location, daily communication is simple and can convey a great deal of information. For this reason, many car-makers have their development teams work on a shared platform. However, it is not always possible to locate all team members at the same location. In this case, measures must be taken to create a physical or virtual “space” to facilitate collective work by enabling team members to learn what the others are doing and make their own contributions at any point in time. One example is a “war room” containing posters where people are invited to make comments or contributions. Another is electronic tools for remote collaboration, enabling people from different locations to work collectively on a single document. In both instances, the mere existence of the tool is not sufficient to ensure effective collaboration: a disciplined process must be established to ensure that people actually use it.

Shared responsibility

A team can capitalize fully on the diverse backgrounds of its members only if they all feel jointly responsible for overall results. This is what provides the incentive required to get people engaged in aspects of the mission that

The leader must share responsibility for decisions with the entire team.

they are not actually in charge of, to challenge their views, or to place the best interests of the group before their own.

To establish this climate, the leader’s everyday behavior is critical. Two aspects emerge as being particularly important:

Foster collective decisionmaking

A sense of shared responsibility can be created only if a team feels collectively accountable for key decisions. This contradicts the all-too-common configuration in which the leader sets

the general direction, allocates work among the members, and alone makes delicate tradeoffs. Team members kept from taking part to key decisions tend to withdraw into their own domains, leaving overall coordination up to the leader. In the process, a good part of the added value of working as a team is lost.

At the same time, systematically trying to reach consensus can greatly hobble efficiency by bogging things down in endless debate, or paradoxically by creating a climate where disagreements are masked. So how to manage the balance between collective accountability and efficiency? The authors of *Power Up* offer the following recommendations:

- **Collectively discuss critical issues.** Faced with a delicate decision likely to impact overall results, the entire team must be engaged in order to maintain a sense of shared responsibility.
- **Define decision-making rules.** Whenever possible, key decisions should be made by consensus. Even so, the leader should know when to make the decision himself, for example when discussions go in circles, or concern matters of secondary importance. For this reason, it is helpful to

FIGURE D Encourage mutual influence and constructive conflict

Encourage members to express different points of view and disagreements

- Beware of the impact of your position as leader. Clearly express your desire to hear when team members disagree with your point of view.
- Try to encourage team members who have trouble expressing their point of view when they encounter opposition.
- Support minority opinions.
- Be attentive to non-verbal signs of disagreement or withdrawal and encourage those concerned to express themselves—otherwise, they may distance themselves or disengage from the group.
- Beware of the tendency to cut debate short out of concern for maintaining a positive climate in the team.

Stimulate discussion to ensure the quality of important decisions

On important points, beware of consensus that occurs too rapidly. Rekindle the discussion with the following techniques:

- Draft a list of pros and cons of the decision under consideration, in order to review the problem thoroughly.
- Ask team members to take turns playing “devil’s advocate,” by trying to find weaknesses in the proposed solution.
- Develop a scenario in which the decision turns out to be a total fiasco, and ask each member of the team to try to imagine the reasons.

Manage interpersonal conflicts

Conflicts can arise not only over ideas, but also over the behavior of other team members (e.g. “You’re wasting our time with your constant tardiness.”). Such conflicts can be very useful, because it is important to deal with individual shortcomings. However, they should not be allowed to degenerate into personal attacks.

- Try to ensure that remarks remain factual, and refer to observed behavior (“You interrupted me.”), rather than make subjective judgments concerning the personality of the other person (“You’re egotistical.”) or the hypothetical intentions behind the behavior in question (“You’re trying to shut me out.”)
- Avoid letting problems stew. Conflicts that explode in the heat of the moment are more difficult to control. To keep unproductive tension from building up, discussions in which team members can express their feelings in a calm context should be encouraged.

establish rules on the ways decisions should be made (Figure C).

- **Avoid deciding too quickly.** When discussions lead to a stalemate, a few questions should be asked before making a decision that goes against the opinion of some members. Is the problem caused by a lack of shared understanding of the objectives and priorities? In this case, the decision should be postponed, and discussion temporarily focused on the vision, knowing that occasional “backtracking” of this kind is absolutely normal. Alternatively, the problem could be caused by the attitude of some participants. In this case, the leader should share his or her feelings with the team or the concerned party, and try to motivate them to change their behavior.

Encourage mutual influence and constructive conflict

A team can capitalize on the complementary skills of its members only if the latter truly express their different points of view. Moreover, the sense of shared responsibility will be all the stronger if everyone feels that his or her deep concerns have been heard. Yet, some leaders tend to stop confrontational discussions short, for fear of damaging the cohesiveness of the team. This is a mistake. So long as such conflicts do not turn into personal attacks, they will

help make better decisions, thus reinforcing team pride and cohesiveness. Figure D offers practical tips on this important point.

► A high level of trust

Trust among the members is a key factor in the performance of a team. When trust is lacking, discussion is less open—and can even be distorted by political games—information circu-

Establishing and maintaining trust requires deliberate effort.

lates poorly, and commitment diminishes. Performance is directly affected when this happens.

Nonetheless, trust is not easy to build. A McKinsey study showed that for 65 percent of executives, a lack of trust was an obstacle to top team performance. Similarly, the difficulty of building trust is one of the main problems cited for teams whose members are geographically scattered.

The following are some key drivers that team leaders can use to build trust:

Invest in building relationships

Several studies underline that high-performance teams are those that concern themselves not only with

producing results, but also with establishing effective relationships among their members.

To do this, efforts must be made to help members get to know one another. It is therefore important to organize some face-to-face meetings, particularly when the team is first launched. Studies effectively estimate that 60 percent of the content of messages is conveyed non-verbally, through facial expressions, body language, etc. Even the most sophisticated remote communication systems, such as videoconferencing, cannot capture the essential aspects of this rich source of information. Such systems are therefore insufficient to establish the familiarity that people need to trust one another. Spending part of the time the team is together on social activities such as meals, plant visits, presentations on the national culture or function of individual members, etc., proves to be very helpful.

Organize regular performance reviews and feedback sessions

Regularly leading performance evaluation sessions is a powerful means to reinforce team spirit. This requires reviewing not only the advancement of the assigned mission, but also the quality of cooperation within the team by covering work practices as well as individual behavior.

FIGURE E Facilitate feedback across the team

The following exercise is often very helpful, and generates much less tension than one might initially fear:

- **Ask each team member to write down the following about the others:**
 - The key contributions they are making to the team;
 - Behaviors that they should eliminate or improve to contribute better to the team.
- **Go around the table to gather feedback on the leader from each team member.** The leader should start out by simply hearing what everyone has to say. During the possible subsequent discussion, the leader should try to listen above all, ask any questions required to obtain a better understanding, but not try to justify his or her behavior or argue his or her case.
- **Continue by conducting the same exercise for each team member.**

Other more sophisticated approaches can also be helpful:

- **Use behavioral or personality profile analyses**—one of the most recognized being the MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator). Such analyses are beneficial in that they help people become aware of individual styles, in a non-judgmental fashion, and understand the potential challenges of getting along with other personality styles. These tests often require the involvement of a specially qualified consultant.
- **Use a 360° evaluation tool.** This approach should be used with great care, because it requires people to judge others in detail, on many different aspects.

Based on *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni, Jossey-Bass, 2002.

Two tips can be very helpful in doing this:

- Plan and announce that feedback sessions will be held as soon as the team is launched. Otherwise, these sessions could be perceived as a sign of hidden problems or as a false pretext to settle grievances.
- Carefully prepare and manage these sessions to avoid having them turn into personal confrontations. One way to do this is to define methods and rules to help participants stay objective, share both strengths and weaknesses, and express themselves in a non-aggressive manner. **Figure E** offers several tips in this area.

Ensure efficient circulation of information

Simple misunderstandings that constantly recur can considerably damage trust. For this reason—especially for geographically dispersed teams—rigorous practices on the circulation of information must be established. In particular:

- Explain and communicate to the entire team the roles and tasks assigned to each member, as well as decisions that have been made;
- Establish standards in using electronic communication tools, in order to avoid misunderstandings about response deadlines or a lack of response;
- Sensitize everyone to the importance of consulting the others and keeping them informed as they advance with their own tasks.

Encourage people to respect others and keep their promises

Under pressure to do the job, members may easily underestimate the potential impact of what they see as a trivial break from the rules, such as making a decision to advance despite the absence of a colleague, postponing the completion of a matter without prior notice, etc. However, depending on the context, such acts can have disproportionate repercussions on trust. Leaders must sensitize the members of the team to this, particularly in two ways:

- Insist on making important decisions only after all those concerned have been heard;
- Be strict on calling to order those who break the rules established by the team, and, in the event of major rule-breaking, initiate a discussion on the appropriate measures to take or necessary adjustments to the rules.

Links with the rest of the organization

The success of a cross-functional team is not just a matter of how well the members collaborate as a team. It also depends on how well the team interacts with the rest of the organization. This interface between the team and

The leader must be careful that the team does not isolate itself by focusing exclusively on its own objectives.

the larger organization primarily falls to the leader, who must therefore be particularly attentive to this question. Careful attention must be paid to the following points in particular:

Ensure clear and efficient relations with management

The team's mandate and the leeway it possesses are sometimes relatively vague at the start. This is perfectly normal, since much depends on initial results, strategies to be developed or environmental changes. On the other hand, the leader must be careful to clarify who has authority over the team, and the mechanisms for making decisions. Who are the team's contacts in top management and what are their roles relative to the team? Who should hear proposals requiring approval? What hierarchical channels should be used by the team to implement decisions that go beyond its scope of action? These questions must be answered to ensure effective dialogue with management—a critical prerequisite for the lasting success of the team.

Work to build effective links with concerned company departments

The enthusiasm of a close-knit team can unwittingly isolate it from the rest of the organization, by causing it to focus exclusively on its own objectives. Thus isolated, the team risks becoming detached from reality or suddenly being confronted with unexpected opposition. To avoid this phenomenon, the team must systematically list needs for communication with the rest of the organization—either as a group or individually with the superiors of each member—and set minimum routines to satisfy these needs, e.g. periodic newsletters, scheduled updates, etc. This can seem overly formalistic. In practice, however, it is an excellent protection against the risk that important links will be neglected.

Clarify the game rules on resources

Access to resources, including the availability of team members, is a particularly important part of ensuring effective relations with the rest of the organization. Although it is unrealistic to hope that the team will be given a blank check, the game rules must be clarified. What minimal commitment can the team count on? According to what criteria can additional resources be obtained? The point is not only to ensure that work is done smoothly; the expectations of the team must also be managed. Frustration with regard to the availability of resources that the team was counting on can be very demoralizing. The leader must thus make sure that clear rules are established, share these rules with the team, and step in to ensure they are respected if necessary.

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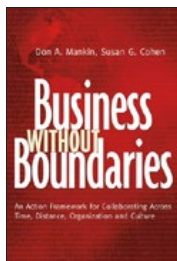
Turning a set of individuals from different backgrounds into a team able to do great things is no small challenge. Knowing where to focus is invaluable as a first step in surmounting this challenge.

Our selection

To find the best ideas on this subject, we recommend the following publications:

Business without boundaries

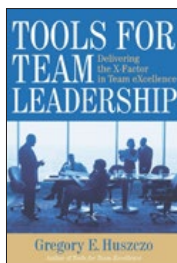
Don Mankin, Susan G. Cohen, Jossey-Bass, 2004.



This book studies the keys to success of internationally dispersed teams. It covers both the context that must be created to foster cooperation across units located in different parts of the world, and key points to ensure a geographically dispersed team functions smoothly. A specific characteristic of this book is that it is principally devoted to three in-depth case studies, covering three different situations. The last two chapters deduce a practical, detailed methodology, illustrated with references to the described case studies.

Tools for team leadership

Gregory E. Huszczo, Davies-Black Publishing, 2004.



This book is a practical manual intended for cross-functional team leaders. The various facets of leading such teams are covered in a methodical manner, including building team spirit, ensuring good communication, managing decision-making, resolving conflict, creating incentive, managing links with the rest of the organization, etc. The author's approach is above all educational. Depending on their experience and abilities, readers may find some passages moderately interesting, but the overall coverage of the topic and the practical direction of the book make it a good work of reference.

And also...

We also relied on the following publications:

- **Global Teams**, Michael J. Marquardt and Lisa Horvath, Davies-Black Publishing, 2001. (Book)
Surmount the obstacles specific to internationally dispersed teams.
- **Power Up**, David Bradford, Allan R. Cohen, John Wiley & Sons, 1998. (Book)
Create a dynamic sense of shared responsibility within teams.
- **Top Teams: Why Some Work and Some Do Not**, Hay Group, 2001. (Article)
The keys to successful management teams.
- **Teamwork Across Time and Space**, The McKinsey Quarterly, 1997. (Article)
Running geographically dispersed teams.

Further readings

To explore this topic further:

- **The Wisdom of Teams**
Jon R. Katzenbach, Douglas K. Smith, Harvard Business School Press, 1993. (Book)
Key factors in the performance of cross-functional teams.
- **Trust in the Balance**
Robert Bruce Shaw, Jossey-Bass, 1997. (Book)
The foundations of trust.
- **Managing diversity**
Manageris synopsis 123b.
Work effectively despite differences in style.

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