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Creating Great Teams

How Self-Selection Lets People Excel

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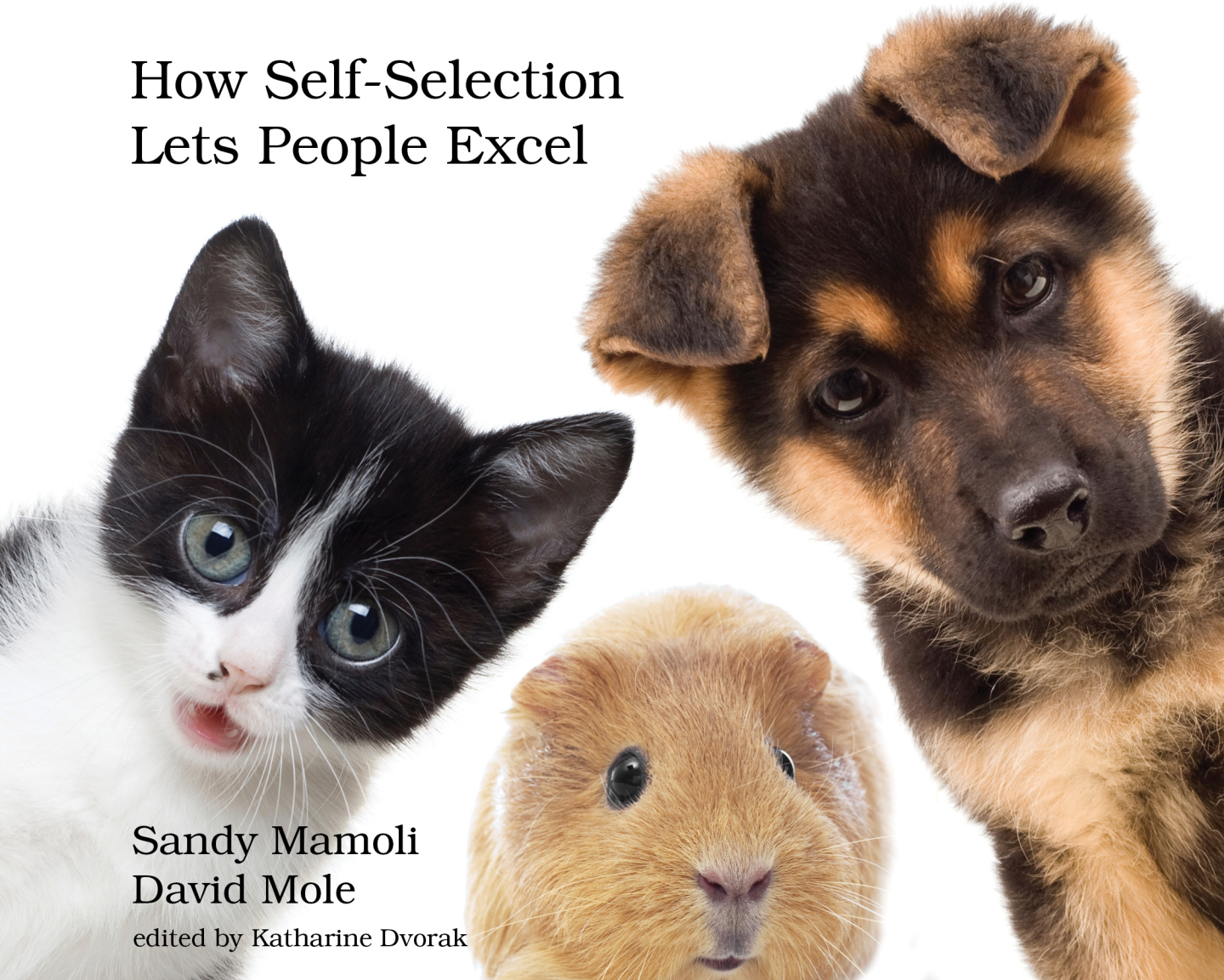

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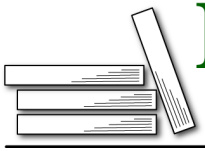

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Foreword

As a consultant and expert in organizational dynamics, I've worked with scores of organizations, and over the course of four decades, I've observed hundreds of teams and team formations. In many of those cases, the focus was assembling the required mix of technical skills—as if the skills existed apart from the people who had them.

Many years ago, I worked for a big, multinational corporation. The company had technology centers spread over every time zone. Every possible skill was represented somewhere in the company. "Couldn't we save money and avoid hiring new people if we could make efficient use of those resources?" an executive wondered.

Every technical employee filled out a profile and became an entry in what was called the Global Skills Inventory (GSI) database. When the executives approved a new initiative, a manager created a skills list and cranked up the database. The manager fed in the requirements and—boom!—the GSI spit out a list of "resources" deployed for the project "team."

It's easy to see the faulty reasoning behind the GSI database. People are not interchangeable units, and technical skills are only part of the equation when people need to work collaboratively.

But what about the traditional way, relying on management judgment to form teams? I've seen selection processes range from very informal—what my friend and fellow agile coach Don Gray calls the Five You's Method ("You, you, you, you, and you. You're the team.")—to very formal processes with job analysis, selection criteria, interviews, testing, and auditions.

Even with the most rigorous process—and in spite of managers' good intentions—the likelihood that any group of people actually gels and becomes a team is low. A few teams soar, many more slog along, and most don't show the level of responsibility and engagement managers hope for.

Fundamentally, two factors determine whether a group will forge itself into a team:

- Do these people want to work on this problem?
- Do these people want to work with each other?

Neither a computer program nor a manager can answer these questions. Only the employees who will do the work can. And that's the subject of this lovely and useful book.

Some managers worry that given the option to self-select, people will act like high-school kids and choose people they like and work that appeals to them. Yes, people may choose those they like to work with on work that seems interesting. That seems sensible to me. People work best when they have choice over what they work on and who they work with. Managers worry that some work won't be chosen—failing to account for employees who will do less-than-thrilling work because they understand that it's necessary for continued operations and place high value on that.

Managers want engaged teams who take responsibility and show initiative. But these concerns hint at a contradiction: a belief that employees won't make responsible decisions left to choose their own teams. Management selection for teams actually works against team responsibility by communicating that people aren't capable of making responsible choices about work and coworkers. However, when teams self-select they're much more invested in success. Team self-selection creates the conditions for team engagement and responsibility.

How do you go from managerial selection to self-selection? If your only image is chaos or choosing up sides for sports—it makes sense that team self-selection looks like a dubious undertaking. It's not as simple as putting everyone in big room and letting them mill around until they find a group they like. As Sandy and David explain, thought and preparation are required for successful team self-selection. This book shows you step by step what successful team self-selection looks like. It provides enough detail so many more managers can imagine how trying team self-selection might look and feel in their own organization.

Sandy and David's book is radical in that it upends the traditional role managers have in hiring and selecting people for teams. It's utterly un-radical in that it shows a practical way forward—based on what researchers have known for years:

- People want to do a good job and contribute to their customers and companies
- Employees work best when they have choice
- They take more responsibility for their own decisions than those made by others
- Collaborative work depends on relationships
- When you treat people like adults, they act that way

Managers need to paint the vision of what needs to be done, organize the work in a sensible way, identify constraints, and then let employees choose their own teams.

This book will help many managers realize that the opposite of managerial team selection isn't chaos. It's commitment, creativity, and engagement, which is what they've been searching for all along.

Esther Derby

Co-author of *Agile Retrospectives: Making Good Teams Great* and *Behind Closed Doors: Secrets of Great Management*
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