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Creating Great Teams

How Self-Selection Lets People Excel

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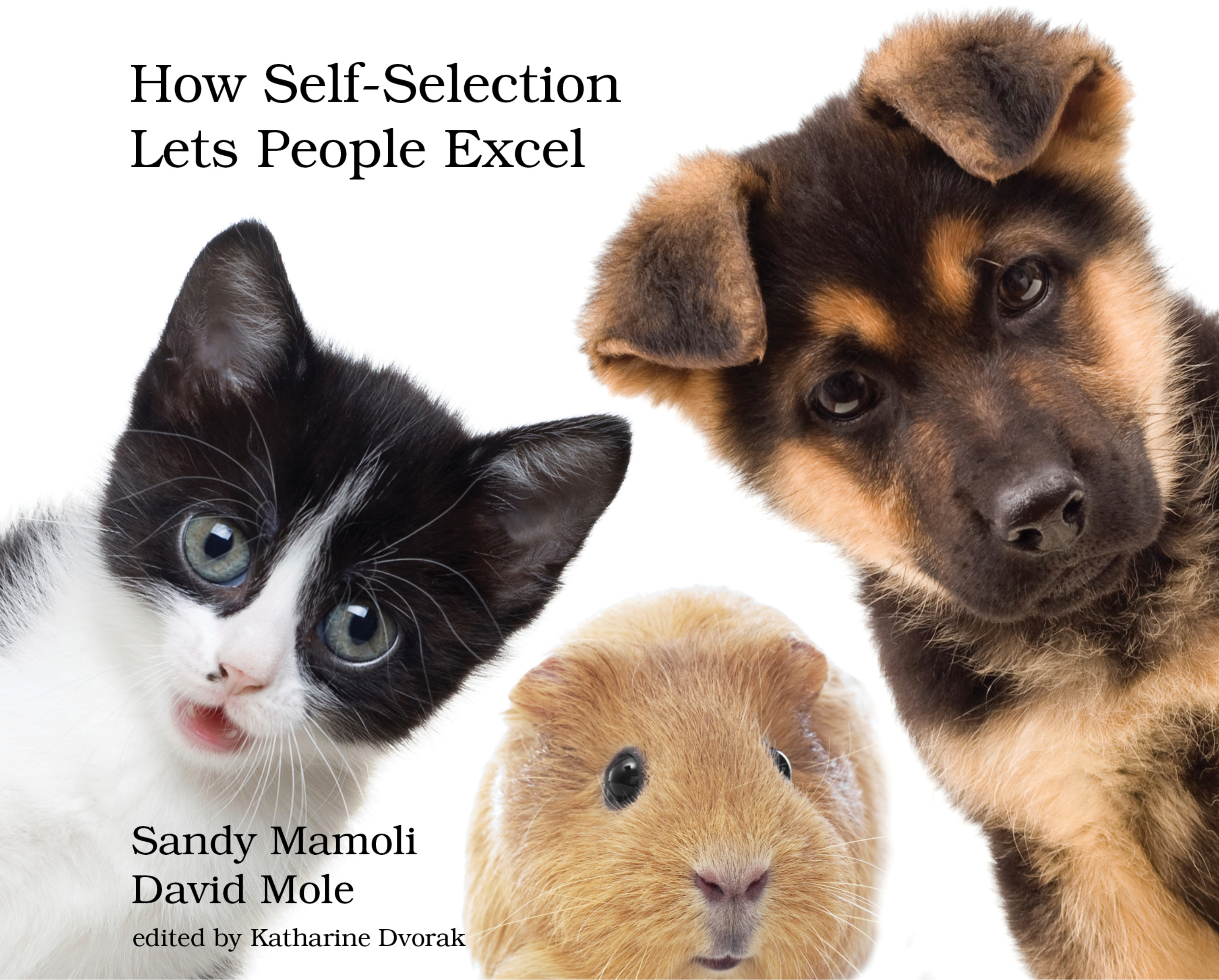

Sandy Mamoli
David Mole

edited by Katharine Dvorak

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The team that produced this book includes:

Katharine Dvorak (editor)
Linda Recktenwald (copyedit)
Dave Thomas (layout)
Janet Furlow (producer)
Ellie Callahan (support)

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By now you will have successfully run your self-selection event. You've watched people react brilliantly to the level of trust you placed in them, and now you're faced with the job of making your squad diagrams real.

The question is, now what? In this chapter we explain the process and steps you need to take to make the outcomes of the self-selection event a reality and quickly and efficiently transition to your new structure.

Making It Real

At the end of a self-selection event, you usually end up with a lot of paper and hopefully a set of self-selected, fully skilled teams. But so far this information is just a collection of diagrams. You now need to go about making it real.

After the event, the participants often have a lot of questions about what's going to happen next, when they can start working in their new squads, and whether this is actually for real or if there will be some last-minute management decree that changes some of the teams that have been designed.

> Protecting the outcome of your self-selection event is critical.

In the immediate aftermath following a self-selection event, it's crucial to confirm that this really is an accepted process and that everyone's choices will be respected. The organization needs to be aware that any change decreed or decision overruled by management will erode the foundation of trust and empowerment you just established, and in fact, the company would be left worse off than if you had used management selection from the beginning. Therefore, protecting the outcome of your self-selection event is critical.

The first thing to do is follow up with each of the newly formed squads. It's important to discuss ideas and concerns and, perhaps most important, to find a date members can start working together. We usually run a meeting with each of the squads using the Lean Coffee[1] format, which is a useful way to run an agenda-less meeting, where the topics for discussion are established by the squad itself. This allows us to manage expectations and to hand over responsibility to the squads to make it happen.

Lean Coffee

Lean Coffee is a structured but agenda-less meeting. It's a fast-paced, timed discussion where people get together, decide on an agenda, and start talking. A Lean Coffee starts with participants populating a kanban board with the topics or items they want

1. http://www.leancoffee.org

to discuss. This forms the agenda and they discuss one item at a time for a set time. (We like three to five minutes.) Participants move a sticky note to "Doing" and discuss the topic before they move it to "Done."

Once the time for that item expires, the group decides whether to keep discussing the topic and add another time slot or move on to the next topic. The meeting ends when the agreed time is up or when there are no more topics left to discuss.

You should meet with each new squad as soon as possible, ideally the very next day. It's vital that you build on the momentum you've created and don't let people go back to their regular jobs without closure from the self-selection event. You need to set the expectations for what will happen next.

You can expect some or all of these questions during these Lean Coffees:

- *When can we start and what happens to our current projects?*

  People are simply wondering "What now?" Do they continue with their current work? Do they need to finish it as fast as possible or hand it over to someone else?

- *Are we adequately resourced?*

  If there were any gaps in your newly created squads, people will be wondering how and when they will be filled. "Does everything we have established get put on hold until we recruit new people? This could take months!"

- *What about logistics?*

  For example, how will the seating arrangements be configured for the new squads? What are the time and date of the squad's first meeting?

It's a great sign of engagement when people are concerned about their current work and don't want to abandon existing projects. It would be a far more dire situation for the company if they didn't care at all. However, ongoing projects often create a web of dependencies where everything is dependent on everything else and there's no obvious place to start.

At Trade Me we were a bit like a tightly wound ball of string with no visible thread; we needed to cut into the ball to make a start. We had to consider the new hires who had been suggested as part of the selection process. Nobody wanted to wait for those people to arrive, but equally nobody wanted to start before the squad was fully skilled. In general we pursued the earliest starting point regardless of what talent were waiting for.

Kick squads off as early as possible. There will never be a perfect time, so if in doubt, go for sooner rather than later. Establish the new squads and let them cover for those who haven't started yet. It's not a big deal because it drives the kind of cross-functional "team-first" behavior you want to see.

Defining Squad Start Dates

It's important to create (and stick to) a schedule, especially if you have many squads, projects, and people. You get to choose whether to do this via a date-driven plan like a Gantt chart or a scope-based approach like a backlog of tasks. Don't let anyone drift, because you're likely to find some people will be frustrated waiting for their new squad to start and others will be gold-plating their existing project not knowing what comes next.

In our case we were dealing with a large organization with many ongoing projects, and we were growing rapidly. It took us almost two months to finish transitioning existing projects to the new squads. Among the contributing factors were unwieldy projects, Christmas holidays that happened to fall soon after, new recruits, and internal movements. We were constantly aware of the danger that until we had established the new squads, something could happen to stop or delay the formation of the new structure. This would have been a devastating blow to the people who had self-selected, so we worked hard to keep momentum. We recommend you do the same!

David says:

> *Looking back, it was fascinating to see how those months were filled with little bursts of energy and enthusiasm when a new person arrived and a number of employees would be freed up and a number of squads could start. It felt a bit like when the perfect shape comes down in Tetris and we could fill three or four lines all at once.*

It's helpful to make the timeline of your plan highly visible to everyone in the office. Display a large calendar with planned start times for squads and check them off and celebrate squads when they launch. We believe that transparency is an important part of keeping things going and not losing momentum.

One thing we didn't do in the beginning but have introduced to later events was regular follow-up meetings, usually every week, with the not-yet-formed squads to keep their focus and buy-in. Here people can raise whatever issue they like. It could be anything from dealing with change that inevitably comes along, such as "What are we going to do now that the project will take longer than we thought to complete?" to "What should we do now that the new hire won't start until four weeks later than we originally thought?" The answer is inevitably something those involved should decide, but the important thing is that squad members have the opportunity to voice their concerns and to creatively solve problems.

One main concern people often have is whether their squads are adequately resourced. Fundamentally, this is a sign that some squads don't feel confident that they're up to the task. It's understandable that they feel nervous and it's a natural part of any team formation. Reassure the squads that you trust their self-selection and that if they find after three months that they need another person or more of a particular skill, they'll be able to make the changes.