

The
Pragmatic
Programmers

Creating Great Teams

Second Edition

How Self-Selection
Lets People Excel



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Self-Selection and the Art of Dynamic Team Design

In a world where change is the only constant—be it rapid growth, downsizing, shifts in strategy, or adapting to remote and hybrid work—there’s always room to explore fresh approaches to organization and teamwork. One promising path is fostering a culture of ownership and autonomy by assembling small, dynamic, cross-functional teams. The key to achieving this? Self-selection.

When we initially defined and trialed our ideas a decade ago, self-selection seemed radical, but now it is proven to be an effective way to design and create teams. Picture this: engineers, quality assurance, business analysts, designers, UX professionals, and product owners all coming together to figure out the best team structures on their own. Taking the managers out of the equation and trusting your people. The results? Nothing short of incredible.

In current times, where remote and hybrid work are the norm and disengagement is a lurking threat, cultivating a sense of ownership and autonomy is more crucial than ever. Self-selection stands out as the perfect strategy to drive engagement. It empowers everyone to choose their work and their teammates, thereby creating vibrant, committed teams.

What Is Self-Selection?

Self-selection is a facilitated process of letting people self-organize into small, cross-functional teams. Think of it as a guided journey toward dynamic teaming and reteaming. It’s founded on the belief that people are at their happiest and most productive if they can choose what they work on and who they work with.

It's not just about self-organizing teams—though those are great! *Self-organizing teams* are groups of motivated individuals who work together toward a shared goal and have the ability and authority to take decisions and readily adapt to changing demands. This process is about setting up these self-organizing teams through self-selection. Another name for what we are suggesting in this book? *Self-designed teams*.

A Decade of Self-Selection

Back in 2013, we had our first attempt at self-selection at a company called Trade Me, which at the time was New Zealand's biggest ecommerce company. Over 150 people from three cities came together to try out our newly minted self-selection process. It proved to be a huge success, and the story made its way into the first edition of this book, inspiring companies far and wide to give self-selection a shot themselves.

Fast-forward a decade and self-selection has proven its merits in all kinds of organizational settings. Whether implemented at a tight-knit start-up or at a corporate giant, the approach has worked outstandingly well. We've seen it in action both in person and remotely, across different cities and countries.

It's not just about location or company size though. Self-selection has found its place in all sorts of business landscapes—from companies growing or shrinking to those finding their footing after a big re-organization or change of strategy.

We have now seen self-selection work in a variety of contexts and frameworks such as SAFe,¹ LeSS,² or a company's own framework or method. Organizations have successfully used self-selection to create product teams, feature teams, component teams, or any other type of team that fits their needs. And it has been successfully used for everything from dynamic teams that last for days or weeks, to teams that are more stable and static with just a few members swapping in and out every few months.

The global appeal of self-selection is evident in its widespread adoption across various industries and regions. Today, our strategies and insights have inspired countless companies across the globe to embrace self-selection. We have heard stories of self-selection events from Australia, Denmark, Germany, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, Taiwan, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

1. <https://scaledagileframework.com>

2. <https://less.works/less/framework>

And people love it.

After every self-selection event, we ask people how they feel about their new teams. Time after time, the feedback is overwhelmingly positive. It turns out that when you let people choose their own teams, they become happier and more committed to team success.

What's the big takeaway from more than a decade of self-selection? Whether your goal is to tackle the known or explore the unknown, letting people pick their teams is the way to go. It's not just a theory; it's a practice that's been tried, tested, and proven to bring out the best in people. It's about tapping into what people naturally hope for in a team: collaboration, autonomy, and a little bit of magic.

Over the past decade, self-selection has not only proven its worth but has also laid the groundwork for something powerful, the art of deliberate and thoughtful team design. By allowing individuals to choose their teams, we tap into their intrinsic motivation and align personal strengths with team goals. So, let's start by diving deeper into the art and science of team design and how self-selection can be the optimal foundation.

The Art of Team Design

Mention the word “team” and it's likely images of sports teams spring to mind: footballers strategizing in a huddle, or a volleyball team setting up a match-winning spike. In the realm of sports, outstanding teams are made up of individuals who have learned to leverage each other's strengths and compensate for weaknesses, operating as an integrated unit.

This concept of teamwork is mirrored in the world of work. No where more so than in technology teams, where developers, designers, analysts, product managers, and others work together much like a sports team. Each member possesses unique skills and perspectives crucial for successful delivery. Just as a volleyball team relies on every player to set up and execute a play, a technology team depends on the same connection between team members.

The success of any initiative, much like a match, depends on the collaboration of diverse roles. The team's collective achievement in developing functional and impactful technology is a testament to the synergy at play, where the whole significantly surpasses the sum of its individual parts.

Today's Work Demands Dynamic Teams

In today's ever-changing world, an organization's success hinges on its ability to stay ahead of the curve, foreseeing and reacting to various shifts in its

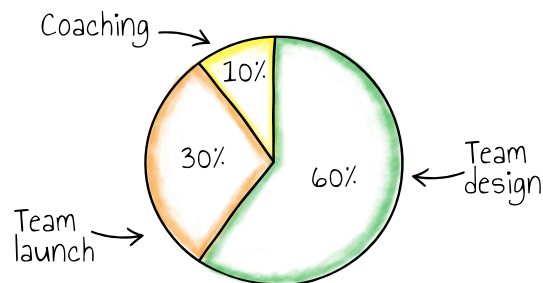
surroundings. Whether it is a new trend in consumer behavior, a shift in technology, or a change in the economic landscape, the ability to quickly recognize and adapt to these changes is what keeps an organization relevant and competitive. It is about being agile and resilient, transforming challenges into opportunities, and continually evolving to meet the demands of the environment.

The ability of teams to work well together and learn from each other and their surroundings, is what determines whether an organization thrives or falters. It is not just about individual expertise; it is about how effectively a team can come together, share insights, adapt to new information, and tackle challenges as a unit. This collective ability to learn and grow is the cornerstone of success in a world where adaptability is key.

The Science Behind Team Design

When we started looking into the science, we found research suggesting that team design can be the most important factor in overall team performance. Professor J. Richard Hackman from Harvard University concluded that team design accounts for 60% of the variation in team effectiveness. 30% can be attributed to the way the team is launched, and 10% to leader coaching once the team is under way.³ Hackman emphasizes that well-designed teams (real teams as he refers to them) are marked by distinct characteristics: explicit objectives, tasks tailored for collaborative efforts, team members possessing suitable skills and experiences, sufficient resources, and the availability of coaching and support.

FACTORS AFFECTING TEAM SUCCESS



This is certainly consistent with our own observations. We've watched star-studded teams grossly underperform where the mix of personalities wasn't right. We've seen teams fail because the star players weren't able to see past

3. <https://estherderby.com/miss-the-start-miss-the-end>

their personal preferences and were more focused on their own performance than the team's achievements.

Effective team design hinges on finding the right combination of skills and personalities. However, the landscape of team dynamics is never static; it's constantly evolving. Understanding this evolution is crucial for applying self-selection and team design in a way that accommodates both the seemingly conflicting needs for team stability and the inevitability of change. This brings us to an important consideration: how have views on team stability shifted over time, and what does this mean for modern teams?

Shifting Views on Stability

In the realm of team performance, research (including that of J. Richard Hackman) has consistently highlighted the advantages of stable teams in most contexts. Stability in this sense refers to teams maintaining a core group with minimal, yet thoughtful, changes in membership over a period as long as one to two years. We have long been told that stability is crucial for enabling teams to reach their full potential.

One reason for greater productivity in stable teams is that they don't have to repeatedly go through stages of team-building over and over again. In contrast, teams that are constantly changing, typical in environments where temporary project teams are assembled and then disbanded, may struggle to progress beyond the initial stages of team forming. Such teams risk remaining a collection of individuals, no matter how talented they might be. This constant state of flux is detrimental to performance, as it prevents teams from developing the deep relationships necessary for true synergy.

However, the concept of team stability has evolved significantly over time. Previously, the belief was that stable teams were the only effective model. This view has shifted, acknowledging the dynamic nature of modern organizational environments. Today's organizations face constant changes; they expand and contract, welcome new members, and bid farewell to others. So, maintaining stable teams can often be a luxury, rather than a norm.

Furthermore, the desirability of stable teams might not be as clear-cut as once thought. Teams can become stale and see a decline in performance after years without new impulses, such as structural changes and fresh team members. This observation is mirrored in elite sports teams, which, despite maintaining a core group of players, routinely undergo changes. These teams add or remove players each season and make substitutions throughout, ensuring they remain dynamic and avoid stagnation.

This shift in perspective on team stability underscores the importance of adaptability within team design. As organizations navigate the delicate balance between stability and dynamism, self-selection offers a powerful tool for building teams that can evolve while maintaining their core strengths. By allowing teams to periodically refresh their composition, we can harness the benefits of stability without falling into the trap of stagnation, ensuring that our teams remain both resilient and responsive to change.

Teaming and Reteaming

The challenge, then, is to find the optimal balance for your organization. This concept is eloquently summarized by Heidi Helfand in her book [*Dynamic Reteaming - The Art and Wisdom of Changing Teams* \[Hel20\]](#), where she asserts, “Since we’re re-teaming all the time, shouldn’t we get good at it?” This statement captures the essence of the contemporary organizational challenge: mastering the art of fluid team dynamics while maintaining the core elements that support team success.

Fluid teams require people to be proficient in the skill of *teaming*. Teaming, as Amy Edmondson describes in [*Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy* \[Edm12\]](#), encompasses a range of activities that include communicating clearly and honestly, taking risks, confronting failure and crossing boundaries. It transcends the limitations and rigidity of traditional team structures and is an active, ongoing process rather than a static state.

Dynamic reteaming is an extension of this concept, embracing the inevitability of change within teams. It acknowledges the various forms this change can take, from the simple addition or removal of team members to more significant shuffling. Dynamic reteaming is the process where teams undergo changes, ranging from simple alterations like adding or removing a team member to more radical transformations such as merging members from various teams to create a new one. This concept acknowledges the fluidity and ever-changing nature of modern team structures, emphasizing the need for adaptability and resilience in the face of organizational shifts.