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# Eight Ways to Build Collaborative Teams

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By Lynda Gratton, Tamara J. Erickson

## The Idea in Brief

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To execute major initiatives in your organization--integrating a newly acquired firm, overhauling an IT system--you need **complex** teams. Such teams' defining characteristics--large, virtual, diverse, and specialized--are crucial for handling daunting projects. Yet these very characteristics can also destroy team members' ability to work together, say Gratton and Erickson. For instance, as team size grows, collaboration diminishes.

To maximize your complex teams' effectiveness, construct a basis for collaboration in your company. Eight practices hinging on relationship building and cultural change can help. For example, create a strong sense of community by sponsoring events and activities that bring people together and help them get to know one another. And use informal mentoring and coaching to encourage employees to view interaction with leaders and colleagues as valuable.

When executives, HR professionals, and team leaders all pitch in to apply these practices, complex teams hit the ground running--the day they're formed.

### The Idea in Practice

The authors recommend these practices for encouraging collaboration in complex teams:

#### What Executives Can Do

**Invest in building and maintaining social relationships throughout your organization.** Royal Bank of Scotland's CEO commissioned new headquarters built around an indoor atrium and featuring a "Main Street" with shops, picnic spaces, and a leisure club. The design encourages employees to rub shoulders daily, which fuels collaboration in RBS's complex teams.

**Model collaborative behavior.** At Standard Chartered Bank, top executives frequently fill in for one another, whether leading regional celebrations, representing SCB at key external events, or initiating internal dialogues with employees. They make their collaborative behavior visible through extensive travel and photos of leaders from varied sites working together.

**Use coaching to reinforce a collaborative culture.** At Nokia, each new hire's manager lists everyone in the organization the newcomer should meet, suggests topics he or she should discuss with each person on the list, and explains why establishing each of these relationships is important.

#### What HR Can Do

**Train employees in the specific skills required for collaboration:** appreciating others, engaging in purposeful conversation, productively and creatively resolving conflicts, and managing programs.

**Support a sense of community by sponsoring events and activities** such as networking groups, cooking weekends, or tennis coaching. Spontaneous, unannounced activities can further foster community spirit.

Marriott has recognized the anniversary of the company's first hotel opening by rolling back the cafeteria to the 1950s and sponsoring a team twist dance contest.

What Team Leaders Can Do

**Ensure that at least 20%-40% of a new team's members already know one another.** When Nokia needs to transfer skills across business functions or units, it moves entire small teams intact instead of reshuffling individual people into new positions.

**Change your leadership style as your team develops.** At early stages in the project, be task-oriented: articulate the team's goal and accountabilities. As inevitable conflicts start emerging, switch to relationship building.

**Assign distinct roles so team members can do their work independently.** They'll spend less time negotiating responsibilities or protecting turf. But leave the *path* to achieving the team's goal somewhat ambiguous. Lacking well-defined tasks, members are more likely to invest time and energy collaborating.

- [Purchase the full-length Harvard Business Review article here.](#)
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Further Reading

Articles

### **[Can Absence Make a Team Grow Stronger?](#)**

*Harvard Business Review*

May 2004

by Ann Majchrzak, Arvind Malhotra, Jeffrey Stamps, and Jessica Lipnack

The authors focus on the virtual nature of complex teams, arguing that companies don't need to bring far-flung team members together to get their best work. When people collaborate virtually, they feel freer to contribute outside their areas of expertise. And because they don't have to wait for meetings to make decisions, their projects advance faster. But to reap these advantages, team leaders must manage work processes and social dynamics shrewdly. For example, rather than depend on videoconferencing or e-mail, which can be unwieldy or exclusionary, use online team rooms,

where everyone can easily see projects' status, discuss the work, and be reminded of decisions and commitments. Hash out differences in teleconferences, which also help foster group identity and solidarity.

## **Boosting Your Team's Emotional Intelligence--for Maximum Performance**

HBR Article Collection

March 2001

by Daniel Goleman, Vanessa Urch Druskat, Steven B. Wolff, Jon R. Katzenbach, and Douglas K. Smith

Emotional intelligence is a key collaboration skill. This collection explains how teams can perform more effectively by sharpening their EI. In "What Makes a Leader?" Daniel Goleman defines the five competencies of EI for individuals, which include knowledge of one's weaknesses and ability to control one's impulses. In "Building the Emotional Intelligence of Groups," Vanessa Urch Druskat and Steven Wolff take EI to the team level, outlining norms groups need to strengthen their emotional intelligence. Norms include letting the group express emotions and handling conflict constructively. In "The Discipline of Teams," Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith address another building block of team EI: mutual accountability based on collective discipline. A disciplined team has several defining characteristics, including a common purpose and specific performance goals.

## About the Authors

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