

AN AGILITY LAB RESOURCE

Adaptive Team Structure and Hiring Guidance

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OVERVIEW

This document summarizes the Agility Lab's approach to team structure and includes recommendations for leaders who are structuring or restructuring their team matrices. You can also use this document as a lens through which to appreciate the strengths and challenges in your current team structures.

The following recommendations will set your team up for greater success regardless of whether you make use of Agility Lab offerings. That said, we developed this document to capture key guidance for leaders that want to create healthy enabling conditions for Adaptive Team rollouts. We'll mention, too, that this guide is a work in progress and we intend to continually improve it with your feedback.

TEAM PRINCIPLES

These principles characterize the Agility Lab's approach to work, which is specifically designed for high-uncertainty environments.

- Teams are our central organizing unit
- Learn our way to impact
- Face challenges with humility and curiosity
- Bravely share ideas, questions, concerns, mistakes, and unexpected results
- Don't let perfect get in the way of good

TEAM STRUCTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations touch on various aspects of team structure: how big the teams are, how often they form and dissolve, what they focus on, how they make decisions, and more.

These recommendations together point to “[durable teams](#).” One way to think about durable teams, from Zach Nies: “durable teams come together to accomplish something that’s larger than any of the team members, requires all of the team members, and for which none of the team members can claim victory as an individual.” We strongly recommend that you create whole, durable teams as much as you can.

TEAM MEMBER TIME ALLOCATION

A wholly dedicated team is a team in which every person’s time is mostly or entirely dedicated to the work of that team ($\geq 75\%$ of each person's time). We strongly recommend that you create wholly dedicated teams as much as possible.

The alternative to wholly dedicated teams is time sliced teams, where each team member is working on 3+ projects at a time. This environment inhibits progress because it creates [secondary work](#), which often looks like waiting which leads to taking on more work which leads to constantly restarting tasks. [Context switching](#) is a natural part of a time-sliced work environment, which also presents serious costs to productivity.

We recognize that it can be difficult to create whole, enduring teams and while we hold 100% time allocation for every team member as a team structure to strive for, we have seen that 1 or 2 team members at 50% on an otherwise durable team can still work well, especially if those people are bringing specific skills to a team.

TEAM FORMATION AND DISSOLUTION

Creating and dissolving teams is a costly endeavor and we recommend doing it as infrequently as possible. Keeping teams together over time allows them to move through [Tuckman's stages of team development](#), from forming through storming and norming, to then spend as much time as possible acting as a high performing team. While working through these stages, teams can build psychological safety, hone their shared norms or working agreements, develop institutional memory, streamline their

ways of working, measure the impact of their work, etc. If teams are not working together over time, they do not have a chance to settle into high-performance practices.

TEAM SIZE

We suggest forming teams that are 5-7 people in size, and you can stretch down to 4 and up to 9 people if necessary. As teams get bigger, transaction costs get higher, and productivity, quality, and responsiveness drops significantly ([Impact of Agile Quantified](#)).

TEAM DECISION MAKING

Clear decision making roles and responsibilities keep teams moving. When teams are unclear about who needs to be involved in what decisions, or how a decision needs to be made, they can get stuck.

Sometimes we put undue weight onto a decision, too. One way to mitigate this is to make a distinction between irreversible and reversible choices, or [“one way door” and “two-way door” decisions](#). For irreversible “one way door” decisions, Bain’s [RAPID](#) tool can help teams clarify and align around decision-making roles. For more common “two-way door” decisions, we recommend that the team members closest to the work have decision-making power.

The [collaborative stance](#) model can be a useful framework, too, for helping teams talk about *how* to make various decisions.

TEAM PURPOSE

Whether you organize your teams around territories (example: a watershed), around functions (example: government relations), around interventions (example: floodplain buyouts), or around another type of category, you will encounter structural shortcomings. We do not have an opinion on which of these organizing purposes you choose for your teams.

We do recommend that you:

- Keep each team’s purpose broad enough that they can adapt their work as a team without putting individual jobs at risk

- Keep team purposes broad enough that every team member can see how their work contributes to the team's success
- Keep each team's purpose visible within and across teams
- Ensure that your teams' purposes cover all of the work you want done across your portfolio of teams
- Test different ways to address the gaps inherent in whatever organizing purpose(s) you use for your teams

TEAM GOALS

It's important for teams to have a clear, shared definition of success. In our view, this means identifying an arrival point while preserving the team's ability to adjust how they get there.

When it comes to team goals, we recommend that:

- Teams develop their own quarterly and monthly goals within parameters established by leadership
- Teams have the ability to deprioritize, pause, or hand off work as they learn about which approaches are more and less impactful
- Teams goals about understanding a problem and empathizing with a customer come before team goals about experimenting with possible solutions
- Teams take a "good enough for now" or "don't let perfect get in the way of good" approach to quantitative goals for their conservation work

HIRING RECOMMENDATIONS

We acknowledge that "[culture eats strategy for breakfast](#)," and the personalities of the people on a team matter at least as much as the structures you establish for them when it comes to creating high-performing teams. The following recommendations are intended for use in hiring, and can serve as a lens through which to understand your existing teams.

LOOK FOR PEOPLE WHO WILL PROMOTE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

In psychologically safe teams, team members feel accepted and respected, and therefore safe in taking risks and "[failing forward](#)." Individuals can make or break a team's psychological safety through their behavior. [Desirable behavior for psychological safety](#) includes active, empathetic listening, assuming best intent, acknowledging and

fixing your own mistakes, and valuing people as people (rather than equating the value of a person with the value of their work).

As you seek these individuals, consider using the following interview question:

- Will you tell us about a time when a colleague or report failed? How did you respond?
 - Listen in their answer for a respectful, supportive approach that separates the value of the person from the behavior or work (“hard on ideas, easy on people”)

LOOK FOR A BIAS TOWARDS ACTION

People who exhibit a [bias toward action](#) proactively identify opportunities to make progress toward team goals make great team members in work environments that require navigating uncertainty. “When in doubt, try it out” is a norm that captures this approach.

As you seek these individuals, you could use the following interview questions:

- Will you tell us about a time you proactively solved a problem for your team?
- Do you prefer to be told how to do something, or to be told what success looks like and then figure out how to get there?

LOOK FOR A GROWTH MINDSET

People with a [growth mindset](#) believe that they can improve their skills over time. A growth mindset contrasts with a fixed mindset. People with a fixed mindset believe that they cannot learn, develop their skills, and grow over time. Growth mindsets are essential to adaptive teams. Behaviors that characterize a growth mindset include seeing challenges as opportunities, receiving and giving feedback freely, embracing failure as part of the learning process, and working toward goals.

As you seek these individuals, you could use the following interview questions:

- What is a skill you’ve been working to develop?
 - Simply having an answer - or more than one - is great for this one.
- What are your professional development priorities?
 - Listen for the above behaviors in their answer.
- Will you tell us about a time you failed in your pursuit of a goal?

- Listen for the above behaviors in their answer.

LOOK FOR PEOPLE WHO CAN TAKE ON A VARIETY OF TASKS

Generalizing specialists are people who bring deep experience in one domain as well as a range of skills that allow them to take on a variety of tasks, learn quickly to tackle new challenges, fill in for other team members, and capably engage with a variety of internal and external partners. Teams that include flexible, capable people have an easier time working in collaborative, adaptive ways.

As you seek these individuals, you could use the following:

Job description language

- Collaborate to meet team goals

Interview questions

- Will you tell us about a time you took on a challenge that was not in your job description?
 - Listen in their answer for openness and ease in how they approach unanticipated, different work

Questions? Please reach out to our Agility Lab team members!

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