Long Live the Team! Factors in the Longevity and Success of a Semi-Autonomous Work Team

Sarah L. Shreeves
sshreeve@uiuc.edu
University of Illinois Library at Urbana-Champaign

Stephanie Hartman
hartman@mit.edu
Massachusetts Institute of Technology Libraries

Elke Piontek-Ma
epm@mit.edu
Massachusetts Institute of Technology Libraries

Introduction

The success of a work team hinges on many factors including shared objectives and goals, adaptability, assessment, and a sense of cohesion and mutual trust. But do these same factors contribute to the longevity of a work team? How does the success of a work team feed its longevity? This chapter will examine the ten year history of a semi-autonomous work team within the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Libraries to identify the key factors in its continuing success and examine how these have affected its longevity. Presented within the context of previously published research on success factors and longevity of work teams, we identify the activities and behaviors that have been crucial to the success of the team. In particular, this chapter will describe team members’ efforts to build a stable team structure that promotes continuity and success in terms of both performance and team cohesion over time and through multiple staff changes.

We should make three explanatory notes before we begin. The first is that when we speak of a team we are using Cohen and Bailey’s definition that “work teams are continuing work units responsible for producing goods or services. Their membership is typically stable, usually full-time, and well-defined.” The second note is that the authors are all either past or current
members of the team described in this paper. As such, we are sharing our experiences and reflections, and, although these are can be understood within the findings of the literature on teams, they are neither generalizable nor should they be taken as the results of a rigorous research study. We present these in the hopes that our experiences will inform others interested in how teams can succeed over time, and to offer a specific example of a team that has survived for over ten years. Thirdly, for clarity’s sake, we use ‘we’ to refer to the authors, and ‘team’ to refer to the work team discussed here as far as we are able.

Background

Founded in 1994, the Dewey and Humanities Processing Team is a semi-autonomous technical services (or local processing) team of six members—five support staff and one academic professional (the supervisor)—working within two public service divisions of the MIT Libraries, the Dewey Library for Management and Social Sciences and the Humanities Library. The mission of the Dewey and Humanities Processing Team is to provide all library users and staff with accurate and timely processing of library materials and maintenance of the online catalog and other online resources in order to support the accessibility of library materials in all formats as well as the professional services of the MIT Libraries.

The team was formed through the merger of the existing local processing units in the Dewey and Humanities Libraries. A combination of circumstances including staffing shortages and the merger of the administration of the two libraries made it possible to introduce a new organizational structure for the processing units. At the time of the merger the Dewey processing office had three full time support staff positions, one of which was unfilled, one half time support staff position, and one vacant supervisor (academic professional) position. The Humanities processing unit had a full time supervisor (also an academic professional) and one full time
support staff member. With the merger of the two units the Humanities supervisor split his time equally between Dewey and Humanities, and the Dewey supervisor position was eliminated. The half time position at Dewey was combined with a half time position at Humanities to create one full time position that also worked at both libraries.

At the time of the merger, two staff members were long time employees of the MIT Libraries, but the majority had been hired since 1992. One employee left during the formation period, and a new staff member was hired explicitly as a member of the team. Job descriptions from that point on have included a description of the team environment and highlight collaborative skills as an important aspect of each position. Over the team’s ten-year history, there have been three team supervisors, two of whom were hired from within the team. In total, twenty individuals have worked in the team over the last ten years; fourteen of these were recruited after the team’s formation. On average, each of the six positions has had four incumbents, and the average number of years in a position is currently two and a half years.

Table One outlines the personnel changes over the past ten years.

[Insert Table One here]

The process to move from a unit of individuals to a cohesive and high performing team took approximately two years. During that period the continued support of the Dewey and Humanities Libraries administration was crucial. It is difficult to judge when staff members outside of the team accepted this new entity, but as more and more had positive experiences with the team and the way it worked, acceptance grew steadily.

Research on Group Success and Longevity

How do we define success? What does a successful team look like? The meta-literature reviews and analyses of Paris, Salas, and Cannon-Bowers\(^2\) and Guzzo and Dickson\(^3\) have
summarized a wide range of success indicators for high performance as well as the traits and competencies needed to reach them. We are particularly drawn to Sundstrom, De Meuse, and Futrell’s definition:

We favor a broad definition [of an effective team] that accounts for members' satisfaction and the group's future prospects as a work unit by incorporating *team viability*. At a minimum, this entails members’ satisfaction, participation, and willingness to continue working together. A more demanding definition might add cohesion, inter-member coordination, mature communication and problem-solving, and clear norms and roles—all traditionally identified with team maturity. *Performance* means acceptability of output to customers within or outside the organization who receive team products, services, information, decisions, or performance events (such as presentations or competitions).

[emphasis theirs]

Following these summaries and drawing on our own experience in the team, we have specifically identified the following to be indicators of this team’s success:

- Team cohesiveness is strong among team members;
- Mutual trust exists among team members;
- Open communication exists within the team and with staff and units outside of the team;
- Performance goals are met and exceeded;
- Team members have an interest in and are involved in the environment outside of the immediate team; and
- The team can adapt to a changing environment.
Each of these appears repeatedly in the literature as a defining characteristic of an effective team. A significant portion of the literature focused on “project teams,” i.e. teams with a limited lifecycle. Group longevity has not been an important factor in this facet of the research. However, even research on work teams has tended to ignore temporal effects on the development of teams. In 1986, McGrath called for more research on the temporal patterns of work groups. Cohen and Bailey repeated that call in 1997, and noted that the lack of longitudinal studies is a significant gap in the research on teams. Schippers et al. also note the lack of longitudinal studies. Most recently Arrow et al. conducted a literature review of studies that included a temporal perspective (of any kind) on small groups and concluded that while an impressive amount of research had been conducted, there existed ‘vast areas of terrain’ yet to be explored. Subsequently, there is not yet a good understanding of temporal effects on team effectiveness and performance.

Despite this dearth of research on group longevity, there are a handful of relevant observations from the literature. Katz studied the effect of group longevity (as measured by the average length of time that group members had worked together) on behavior and performance. He found that the optimum amount of time for a group to work together was approximately two to four years. Work groups whose members have worked together longer on average tended to have a reduction in their performance levels, were increasingly isolated from outside sources of new ideas, and grew more complacent. In contrast Schippers et al. found that more homogeneous teams (in terms of age, gender, educational level, and tenure) that had been together longer were more reflexive, i.e. explicitly reflected on their goals, strategies, and processes and adapted them accordingly. These authors suggest that these teams have learned to build in communication channels and other organizational strategies to counter a tendency...
towards isolation. Arrow et al. note that “[c]ontinuity occurs in groups that experience change while maintaining and reenacting consistent patterns and structure.”

Throughout the discussion so far we have been careful not to equate longevity to success. In the team’s ten year history there have been two specific points when the team could easily have been disbanded or collapsed, such as when the administration of the Dewey and Humanities Libraries was pulled apart in 1998, or when four of the six members left the team in 2000 (see Table One). The team survived in both cases. We suggest that our team’s ability to effectively and iteratively reinforce successful participatory behaviors, attitudes, and skills as detailed below, a healthy dose of luck, and the strong support from the administration has contributed to the team’s ability to survive over the long term.

Success Factors

So what are these participatory behaviors, attitudes, and skills? We believe that the key success factors for the Dewey and Humanities Processing Team are that:

- The entire team participates in the hiring and training of new team members;
- The team is actively aware of the working styles, personalities, and needs of the individual team members, and team activities are adjusted as needed;
- Decisions (including hiring of new members and goal setting) are made by the consensus of the entire team;
- Team training is conducted by the team internally;
- All team members are cross trained in each others’ responsibilities at both the Dewey and Humanities Libraries;
- Goal setting and assessment of the team’s performance (both external and internal) is conducted regularly by the team as a whole; and
Project management leadership and responsibility is rotated among all team members. Underlying each of these activities and behaviors are the core principles of open communication and flexibility. We do not discuss these as separate behaviors because they are threaded throughout the discussion below.

The remainder of the paper will be devoted to discussing each of these factors. We will describe each of these activities and then discuss the effects they have on our team’s success and long term viability.

Hiring and Incorporating New Team Members

What We Do

All team members participate in the hiring process from the beginning to the end. When a position is vacant, the team first reviews the job description to make sure the responsibilities are correct. The descriptions are often tweaked and modified to keep workflows current and to shift responsibilities within the team. The team reviews the resumes as they arrive and determine who will be interviewed, what the interview will look like, and the questions that will be asked. While the supervisor does tend to make contact with the interviewees, schedules the interviews (a sometimes onerous process given the need to schedule time with six team members), and handles the administrative details of the search, all team members participate in the substantive portion of the interview. At the end of the interviews, the team discusses the interviewees and comes to a decision about who to hire. This is not an inconsequential process, as the team uses consensus to reach decisions. The consensus decision-making style is discussed further below, but we will note that hiring decisions have generally been the most difficult to make. Once a decision has been made the supervisor shifts the offer process to the human resources office and contacts the unsuccessful interviewees.
When the new hire arrives, all team members share the responsibility for incorporating and training the new teammate. Training activities are discussed further below, but generally one or two team members have the direct responsibility for training the new hire. In addition the team conducts team training activities. Recently, the team has decided that each member would spend one-on-one time with the new hire to explain her own job in more detail and get to know one another better.

**What are the Effects?**

The overall effect of the hiring and incorporation process is a sense of shared responsibility for the team as an entity in itself as well as an opportunity for the reflective activities as described by Schippers et al.\(^{19}\) Reviewing the job descriptions gives the team an opportunity to examine and revise workflows to improve performance. It also offers an opportunity for team members to have some task variety and to engage new challenges as the team can shift responsibilities among members when a vacancy occurs. As the team reviews resumes together, members share their thoughts on what—beyond experience—they are looking for in a new team member. What kind of gaps in the team need to be filled? The interviews themselves allow the team to speak of themselves to an outsider and to express their pride in being part of a team. The shared training process ensures a “natural” progression of incorporating and welcoming the new team member, and reinforcing a sense of membership among everyone.

As noted above, the decision-making process itself is the most difficult, but often the most rewarding, part of the hiring process. It can take a substantial amount of time—as long as two days of discussion spread out over a week—to come to a consensus on a candidate particularly when there are two or more strong ones. The consensus process will be discussed in...
more detail later in the chapter, but suffice it to say that the team has consistently found this process well worth the time and effort spent. The discussions often uncover issues with team performance and dynamics not previously addressed, and in the end have brought greater team cohesion out of struggles to make these important and difficult decisions.

This process has worked particularly well when the team is handling a single vacancy and has a core of team members who have had tenure of a year or more. However, even during periods of substantial turnover, the team has been able to maintain continuity, that is the team structures and processes have stayed intact. The team has been lucky in that at least one anchor—a longstanding team member with experience, knowledge, and leadership skills—has been in place to ensure stability throughout periods of substantial turnover. For example, in 2000, the team witnessed unprecedented turnover, with three veteran members (two with three and one with six years of experience) and the team supervisor (with six years of team experience and eight years in the processing unit) all leaving within the space of seven months (see Table One). Their departure left some very big holes to fill. Fortunately for the survival of the team, a member with three years of experience on the team filled the supervisor position and had the expertise, knowledge, and, most importantly, team development skills to stabilize the reconstituted team. We are uncertain that the team would survive a substantial turnover without a remaining anchor.

Active Awareness of Personality and Working Styles

What We Do

The team’s initial formation period was rocky. Most members had been brought together through the merging of the two local processing units, and not the current hiring process. We were suddenly charged to think and approach our work in a new way. It was at this point that the
team began to learn the value of understanding personality and working styles and what effect that understanding could have on the team itself.

During the team training that occurred in the team’s formation period (1994-1996), personality and working style instruments were administered to all team members (including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® and the DiSC Behavioral Style Indicator® instruments). There were skeptics in the group regarding the usefulness of these tools, but in the end the results did show some interesting trends. In particular, they illustrated that the team had few strong communicators. Those who were in this category were essentially the team’s motivators, and had an uphill battle working to increase the group’s optimism, sense of cohesion, trust, and communication. Discussing the results of these instruments allowed the team to confront this imbalance of personalities and to find a middle ground between the differing personalities.

Since this initial experience with these instruments, the team has tried to maintain an active awareness of the personality and working styles of its members and to maintain a balance between differing styles. The team uses personality and working style instruments, but it has been important to also include discussions about these issues at the regular team meetings, during project planning, and particularly during the hiring process.

What is the Effect?

Active awareness of personality and working style has allowed the team to understand where its member’s strengths and weaknesses lie and to think creatively about how best to go about our internal team work and with interactions with outside staff. The team is made up of a diverse set of personalities: detail oriented people, “big picture” people, creative types, skeptics, starters, and finishers. Understanding these traits and styles has been absolutely crucial when planning projects and workflows. Personal awareness of one’s own personality type or working
style has allowed members to challenge themselves by taking on roles they might not be comfortable in; for example, a big picture person learning how to plan a project, or an introvert leading a team meeting or serving on a system-wide committee.

While awareness of personalities was crucial during the formation period, it remains critical with each new hire and thus each new iteration of the team. As people come and go from the team, they take or bring new energy, experiences, and attitude. Questions asked of the candidate are often directed at understanding candidate’s working styles and personalities, and this understanding is of high importance during the decision-making process. Knowing what the team has lost when a team member leaves and when a new team member joins helps to maintain shared awareness of team dynamics.

Consensus Building

What We Do

When the team was formed, we decided that the team decision-making process would be by consensus, that is, coming to a decision as a group. This does not mean that all team members have to agree completely with a decision, but that they can live with and support the decision. The consensus process has been used continuously for all team decisions, but not all decisions individual members make about their work (an important distinction). However, it is used for goal setting, hiring decisions, project planning, and any decision that involves the team as a whole.

The consensus making process itself can be time intensive. Each member of the team contributes their opinions and the group then seeks to find the common ground. When there is disagreement, the team attempts to work through that decision point using a variety of facilitation and decision-making tools.
What is the Effect?

As noted earlier, consensus is not always easy, nor is it always quick. It can be an exhausting and excruciating process, and there have been times—particularly in hiring processes—when the team did not think it would survive the process. However, in every case a decision has been made that the entire team could and did support. Team members have found that the process of consensus building and the ability to come to consensus is heavily grounded in trust. Team members do not have to agree with the team’s decision, but they must agree to live with and support that decision. This is much easier to do if you trust the judgment and opinions of your colleagues and trust in the decision-making ability of the group as a whole.

The support from all team members is key. For example, even if a new hire was not the first choice of a team member, she must agree to support the decision made by the group. This support is shown both internally within the team (training and encouraging the new hire for instance), as well as externally to other departments and units. The lack of support—even from a single team member—would undermine the trust and open communication built through the consensus process. (This is not to say that the team as a group does not revisit decisions - it does.) The shared responsibility that comes with consensus is crucial to team cohesion, mutual trust, and open communication.

Team Training

What We Do

To help with the transition from an individual to a collaborative working style, the group attended several formal team-training sessions in 1994 and 1996 (led by a trainer from the Association of Research Libraries) and continued to attend formal training sessions offered by the MIT Training Office whenever new team members were hired into the group until 2002.
Some sessions were only as long as an afternoon, while others were two day or several days over a series of weeks. In 2002, the team decided they needed a different type of training because the sessions offered by MIT focused almost exclusively on building teams and did not address issues of existing teams, such as how to incorporate new members. As the team has been unable to identify any other viable options, the team itself has taken over the team training functions and has adapted activities and tools from the formal team training sessions for use in their existing environment.

What is the Effect?

The formal team training sessions were especially useful and successful in the beginning stages of the team. These sessions helped team members understand team dynamics (as we outlined in the section on awareness of personality and working styles), how to set goals and measure performance, and techniques for decision-making and communication. In addition, the sessions gave the team time away from daily responsibilities to focus on needs and issues within the team.

However, as noted above, as the team has evolved over the last decade, these formal team training sessions have fallen short of the needs of a mature, established team. Taking over the training functions has added another layer to the ‘self-managed’ aspect of the team. The team has had to be proactive about recognizing team training needs, how to respond to them, and when to take ‘away time’ in the form of one day retreats.

Cross Training

What We Do

Each member of the team is a “specialist” in a specific area(s) whether journals processing and claiming, order processing, or government documents. However, each team
Cross training is time and resource intensive; it occurs with each new hire, and refresher sessions are offered as well. In addition, as workflow processes change (for example, with the implementation of a new library management system) training needs to be updated and revisited. However, cross training fosters a team-wide understanding of the responsibilities and problems encountered in each position and how each position relates to the others in the team. Team members tend to gain a greater appreciation for the work other members do. Learning about your teammate’s responsibilities allows for opportunities to look at your own responsibilities differently and enhances your problem solving skills.

Another obvious benefit to cross training is that it facilitates coverage during vacations, illnesses, and vacancies. Cross training also means that staff members outside of the team do not have to find the “specialist” to ask a question or request a solution to a problem; they can approach any team member who will respond immediately. Only when higher-level skills or knowledge are required, will the team member refer the question/problem to the appropriate
team member. The result is faster service to the team’s constituencies and ultimately better service to the library user.

Goal Setting and Team Assessment

*What We Do*

The team sets aside time each year to set and prioritize goals for the year and to assess its progress on past goals. Goals include task oriented ones (moving 20,000 volumes to storage), process oriented ones (improving communication with other library units), and internally oriented ones (improving communication within the team). They can originate from team members or from other library units or system wide priorities. As part of the goal setting, team members strategize on how best to meet each goal and who on the team will have responsibility. The team assesses conflicting priorities (for example, when both the Dewey and the Humanities Libraries have resource intensive projects underway), individual workloads, and the time and resources needed to meet the goals. The goal setting exercise is a consensus-driven process, and the decisions made are revisited throughout the year particularly as internal and external pressures and priorities shift.

In conjunction with the goal setting process, the team goes through an annual assessment process similar to the annual performance review of individual staff members (indeed using the same form that is used for individual staff members). While this form is far from perfect for use by a team, it does allow for reflection and evaluation of how well projects and daily responsibilities were performed by the team and the effectiveness of the internal activities and processes. The process includes the:

- Evaluation of progress towards goals;
- Listing of major accomplishments and obstacles to progress;

- Appraisal of the team’s job knowledge, initiative, and resourcefulness; and
- Review of the team’s communication, organizational, interpersonal, and problem solving skills

During the assessment process the team tries to distinguish the team’s performance and skill level as distinct from the performance and skill level of its individual members—an often difficult task. The team assessment is not formally connected to the performance review of the individual team members.

What is the Effect?

The goal setting and assessment activities are built in periods for reflection, assessment, reorientation, and prioritization and go hand in hand. The goal setting process allows the team to address problems of conflicting priorities arising from serving two public service units and to reassess activities in areas which may no longer be a priority for the team or the MIT Libraries. Team members will raise concerns about shifting workloads and workflows, and the team can work together to address these disparities. Team goal setting also ensures that every team member endorses the priorities set for the coming year and that the entire team is responsible for meeting those agreed upon goals.

The annual evaluation allows each team member the opportunity to reflect on and express his or her opinion of how the team is doing, how the team is handling the daily work and projects, and the team’s relationships with other units. The team can develop and adopt strategies to respond to perceived problems and gaps in performance.

We should note that goal setting and assessment also occurs on a regular basis throughout the year as needed, but the annual process is time set aside explicitly for the team to reflect on its
performance and internal processes over the past year and for the next year—reflection, that as Schippers et al. point out, can be an important strategy for a well performing team.20

Shared Leadership

*What We Do*

At the start of this chapter we described the makeup of the team as five support staff members and one academic professional who has the supervisory responsibility for the team. In practice, while the supervisor does have responsibility for evaluation of individual team members and administrative responsibility for the team as a whole, the person in this position acts as a team leader rather than a supervisor. However, the team leader is not solely responsible for leading the team. The team practices shared leadership, which is mostly expressed through rotated facilitation of team meetings and project management. Any team member can be the manager for a specific project. The project manager is responsible for:

- Planning the stages of the project in conjunction with the rest of the team;
- Communication with the team and outside staff about the project;
- Procuring the necessary supplies and resources for the project;
- Training team members, if necessary;
- Documentation of procedures; and
- Statistics management.

Examples of such projects include retrospective barcoding of journals collections and mass storage projects.

Shared leadership is also exhibited in everyday work processes as team members communicate and work with one another to solve problems and alleviate heavy workloads. Team
members also participate in system wide initiatives and committees and communicate information from these activities back to the team.

What is the Effect?

Project management helps team members develop leadership skills in a supportive environment. First time project managers will usually have other more experienced team members to mentor them during difficult stages of projects. Once team members develop these skills, they tend to become more active in initiatives and committees across the library system. This ensures that information is flowing into the team from not only the team leaders but other sources as well. Although Katz’s research was focused on research and development project teams, he does suggest that information flow is crucial to continued high performance of teams.21

An important indicator of how well the team has fostered leadership skills is that the two times the supervisor/team leader position has been vacant since the team began it has been filled by a team member. The team’s ability to develop its own leaders has contributed greatly to the team’s longevity and success. The MIT Libraries have also benefited: three additional team members moved into academic professional positions within the system in part because of the leadership (and other) skills they developed on the team.

Conclusion

We have outlined the activities, participatory behaviors, and skills that have contributed to the success of the team as well as its longevity. We also want to acknowledge that the support of the administration and staff of the Dewey and Humanities Libraries, as well as the MIT Libraries as a whole, has had an enormous impact on the team over its ten year history. In particular, when the Dewey and Humanities Libraries were split, the team was allowed to
continue to work across the two libraries. The ability of the heads of the Dewey and Humanities Libraries to ‘share’ the team since that point has been crucial to its survival.

We acknowledge that there are some gaps in what we have presented here. For example, we have not discussed in any depth the impact on team dynamics of having an academic professional and supervisor working on the team with five support staff members. The team has never fully explored these dynamics in part because the supervisor works very hard to downplay that role and to allow other team members to participate fully without feeling ‘supervised’—in a sense acting as a ‘unleader’ as described by Manz and Sims. This, however, is an area that the team should explore more fully.

We have identified what a successful Dewey and Humanities Processing Team looks like and what behaviors and activities have contributed to that success. But what are some of the larger tangible successes? A handful of these are:

- The team has been chosen to pilot several activities, including online serials check-in, in part because the team structure can incorporate unexpected activities such as these;
- As noted above, team members have gone on to more responsible positions within the MIT Libraries because of the skills they have developed with the team;
- The team has been asked to consult with other departments within the MIT Libraries about establishing a team; and
- The team received the MIT Libraries 2004 Infinite Mile Team Award in the category of Communication and Collaboration.

These successes are primarily the result of the hard work of multiple team members over the past ten years to understand what it means to be a member of a team, to work together to make
decisions, to listen and communicate with one another, to share accountability for goals and performance, and to foster an environment of mutual trust.

Notes


19. Schippers et al., ”Diversity and Team Outcomes,” 781.

20. Schippers et al., ”Diversity and Team Outcomes,” 797.


Bibliography


