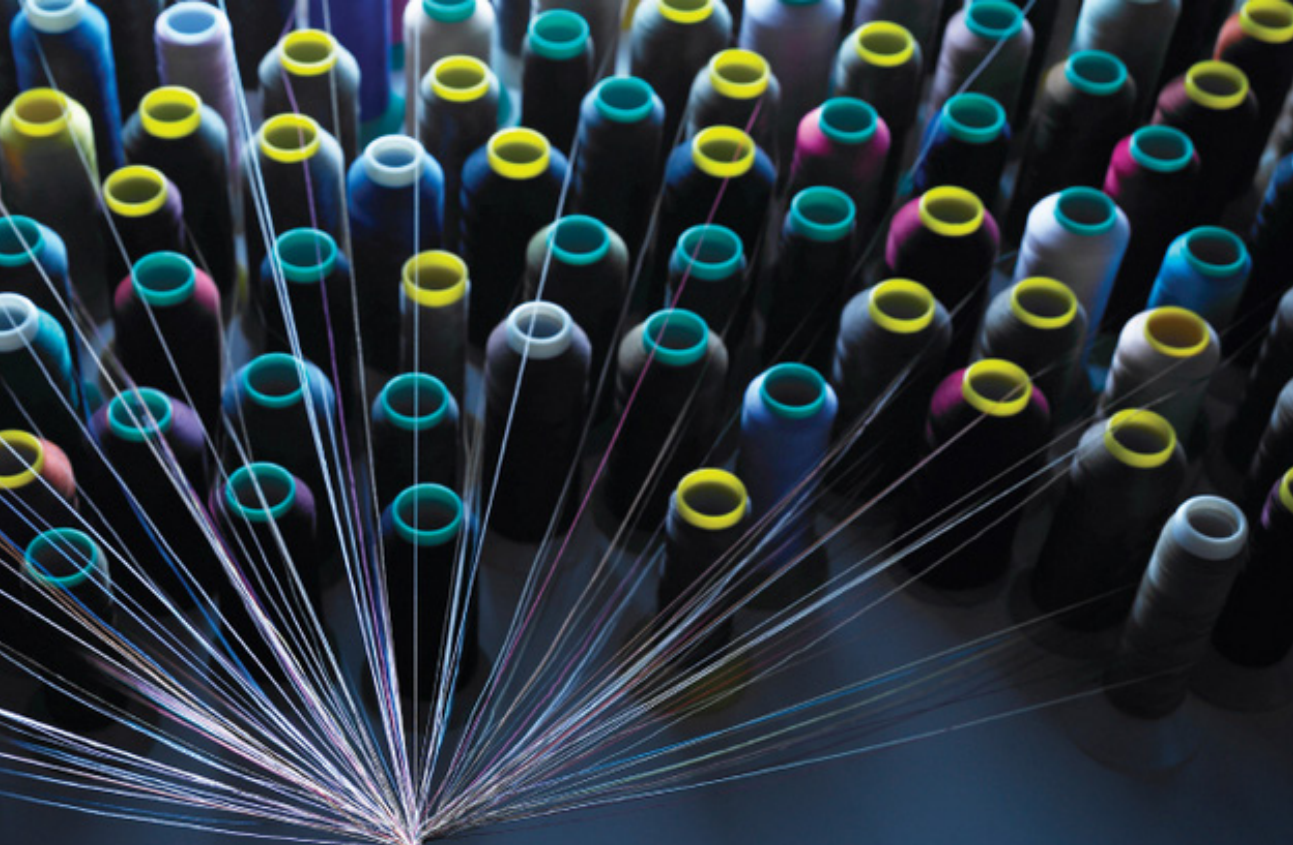

# Group Dynamics and Team Interventions

## Understanding and Improving Team Performance

Timothy M. Franz

WILEY-BLACKWELL

# Group Dynamics and Team Interventions

# Group Dynamics and Team Interventions

*Understanding and Improving Team Performance*

Timothy M. Franz

WILEY-BLACKWELL
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2012


Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

*Registered Office*
John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

*Editorial Offices*
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell.



*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Franz, Timothy M.
Group dynamics and team interventions : understanding and improving team performance / Timothy M. Franz.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4051-8677-3 (hardback : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-1-4051-8670-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Social groups–Psychological aspects. 2. Teams in the workplace. 3. Diversity in the workplace. 4. Leadership–Psychological aspects. I. Title.
HM716.F73 2012
302.3–dc23

2011048256

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 10.5/13pt Minion by SPi Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India

1 2012

*To Liz, Noah, Maddie, and Ethan*

# Brief Contents

# Contents

# Preface

I have been considering writing this book for some time. The primary reason for this is because, as an applied psychologist, I am often dismayed by the lack of communication between academics and practitioners. I work primarily in academia but also do some consulting. I also work with many practitioners. I find that academics often develop and use theory to understand groups and then design excellent interventions that are well communicated to other academics within the research journals. Unfortunately, practitioners seldom read research journals and care little for theory; what they instead want is a tool that works, regardless of why. In addition, practitioners seldom read academic literature. On the other hand, these same practitioners often have excellent ideas that are atheoretical; the reason(s) why they work often remain unexplained. This book is intended to bridge the gap between academic research about groups and real-life practice with teams. Academics who are preparing practitioners and practitioners who are interested in grounding their work in theory should find it useful.

A secondary and related reason for writing this book results from my many years of teaching undergraduate- and Masters-level Group Dynamic courses. Many of the undergraduate and graduate students with whom I've had the pleasure of working are interested in theory. They want to understand systems and have explanations, so they prefer to see the theory that explains how and why groups and teams work in the ways that they do. However, they do not want to stop at only understanding theory. Instead, they want effective theory- and research-based interventions that they can immediately apply to their work. Few texts have this dual emphasis. Instead, some books focus primarily on theory with only a little application (e.g., Forsyth's *Group Dynamics*, 2006 and Stangor's *Social Groups in Action and Interaction*, 2004) while other books focus primarily on application and practices with little mention of or linking to theory (e.g., Kayser's *Mining Group Gold*, 2011 and Wheelan's *Creating Effective Teams: A Guide for Members and Leaders*, 2005). These are all excellent books, and I've used each one in different classes as well as to generate and

improve my ideas for team development exercises. However, they are almost at opposite ends of the continuum from science to practice. Again, this book is intended to bridge the gap.

As a result, I have grounded this book in two different perspectives that best illustrate how I think about applying the small groups and teams academic literature to improving team performance. First, I modeled it after the scientist-practitioner paradigm that is regularly discussed in applied psychology (e.g., Mellott & Mehr, 2007). Although this paradigm is often used to refer to graduate training programs (including graduate programs for industrial and organizational psychologists), it also applies to how individuals subsequently view the world in which they work. This paradigm emphasizes both science (i.e., research) and practice (i.e., application). Specifically, people who believe in this paradigm find that there is benefit to understanding and developing theory resulting from time spent working in the field, and similarly there is benefit to improving work in the field from time spent understanding and/or developing theory. It is this scientist-practitioner paradigm which I hope this book reflects.

The second key theoretical paradigm in which this book is grounded is the emphasis on both action and research, an idea he termed action research. Kurt Lewin (1946/1948), who was first and foremost an academic, was one of the first to discuss the concept of action research (Dickens & Watkins, 1999). His main premise when discussing action research was that for any applied field, such as group dynamics, there must be both basic scientific research that is working to understand general laws and principles as well as applied scientific research that is designed to solve a specific problem. He stated that "for any field of action both types of scientific research are needed" (p. 204). Furthermore, he believed that the research should guide action and action should follow research. Lewin was quite successful at combining his research with action. As a person who works in the tradition of Lewin, I have written this book with understanding research and taking action in mind; this book integrates theory and research with practice and action. Thus, conducting and understanding research about teams is a key feature to the book, and there are interventions in each chapter that can guide action.

As a result, I have organized the book around the concepts that are typically found in undergraduate and graduate group or team dynamics books. Unlike the theoretical books in group dynamics, however, I have also focused each chapter on specific ways to improve groups, which I term interventions, rather than only providing a summary of theories. And, unlike other applied books in improving team functioning, I have relied heavily on theory and empirical research to help select and explain successful interventions. This combination should help readers to better understand teams so as to guide successful application and intervention.

Thus, each chapter first summarizes some of the relevant theory and then provides steps to follow in several different interventions. As a result, practitioners can better understand the "why" of how groups work when intervening in their teams and also have readily available a list of several interventions that they can use to try to help them improve the effectiveness of the teams in their workplace.

## Organization of This Book

Though groups are common today, we often see surface symptoms that show us that a group or team is not performing as well as it might be. These symptoms may include behaviors such as infighting or a rush to agreement, and show that teams need assistance and intervention to improve their performance. However, we often need to learn more about what specifically we need to do before we can intervene. Thus, the first step in intervening is assessment, which is discussed in Chapter 2 along with how to conduct a follow-up evaluation to determine the success of the intervention. Next, Chapter 3 focuses on some basic concepts necessary to understand group processes, such as the importance of the team task in understanding how to help a team. Finally, the remaining chapters of this book are organized around the input-process-output model of group functioning (Hackman & Morris, 1975). This theoretical model suggests that there are certain inputs, such as team member knowledge, personality, expertise, and confidence, that each individual brings to the team (Chapter 4). Then, once the team forms there are things that happen together – this is when group process occurs – and it is necessary to understand concepts such as cohesion, decision making, and problem solving. Finally, there are group outputs, which include concepts such as performance, productivity, and member satisfaction. These are discussed in the final chapter, Chapter 14.

For each chapter in this section, I summarize the main theoretical ideas necessary to understand group functioning. Then, in each chapter I suggest possible interventions that a practitioner might try if the assessment shows that a specific group or team has problems and needs intervention in that area. Although these interventions are included in one specific chapter, some could easily have been included in other chapters as well. Many interventions, to some extent, are integrative and thus have an impact that goes well beyond the specific material in any chapter. Finally, I end each chapter with a case study from a professional in the field discussing how one of the interventions was successful. Thus, by using this book practitioners should:

1. Understand the basic processes involved in assessing and evaluating teams;
2. Have a resource guide that can help them find measurement tools to use to assess and evaluate teams; and
3. Have a toolbox of interventions that they might use to help groups and teams perform better.

## How to Use This Book

The book is focused on understanding how groups work and intervening to improve team functioning. It is intended for academics and practitioners who want to understand and then improve the teams with which they work. It differs from most academic texts in that it emphasizes assessment and intervention rather than just

aiding understanding. It differs from most practitioner books because it is based on theory. As a result, this book can be used by a wide range of experts. Practitioners can use it as a guide to assessing teams in their organization. In addition, they may also use the book to plan a team training exercise that helps provide members with the skills necessary to improve team performance. Academics can use the text to teach team concepts in an upper-level or Masters-level group dynamics or team performance course. Regardless of who uses it, the reader is left with a set of assessment tools and interventions to improve team functioning.

To help academics and practitioners improve team functioning, many chapters summarize specific tools and interventions (i.e., Chapters 3 through 14), and each chapter ends with a case study, titled *Focus on Application*. The interventions provide simplified steps for how to improve groups and teams as well as the reference citation for the original source so that people can find more information as necessary. The case studies provide specific examples of how practitioners have used one of the interventions to solve real-life problems in groups and teams within organizations. They can be a guide for how practitioners should use that and other interventions, or a point of discussion for those who teach courses using this book.

In addition, each chapter ends with a resource list titled *Additional Resources* that might help readers. The list provides some of the resources that inform the theories and interventions included in that chapter. These lists are included because none of the chapters are a comprehensive review of the entire domain of research within that area; instead the chapters provide summaries of some of the key concepts that may be the most important for teams to consider when determining how to assess and intervene. Thus, the additional resources are designed to help users find more information than is provided in the chapter, including other potential interventions. For example, some of the additional resources will list specific assessment tools that can be used to assess the quality of team functioning. Other resources include online sites that provide additional information that might help to stimulate discussion or learn more about teams.

Finally, there are sample team development exercises at the end of each chapter that can be used as aids to improve depth of understanding about the concepts. The team development exercises include videos and video clips that illustrate concepts with an associated set of discussion questions, role play scenarios and instructions, assessment tools, and/or other team building exercises. These can be used in a college course or as part of a training program. As can be seen, the book remains focused on the intersection of theory with practice.

# Acknowledgements

Although the words in this book are mine, I am indebted to many others for helping me fully develop all of the ideas within it. First, my philosophy about groups and teams has been strongly influenced by Jim Larson. The members of the Organizational Learning and Human Resource Development program at St. John Fisher have certainly reminded me to not only understand but, more importantly, apply the concepts about groups and teams to making the workplace better. These include the many current and former graduate students who have helped me to hone and develop my thinking. This also includes the faculty – especially my many conversations and debates with my friend Seth Silver – whose theoretical and applied contributions are too numerous to count. The reviewers provided invaluable feedback about how to make the book even better. And, thanks to the entire editorial team at Blackwell-Wiley. All of you were patient with me when I missed virtually every deadline. Finally, thanks to my family and friends for supporting me during the entire time that it took to complete this book. Without them, this book would not have been possible.

Part I

# Introduction

# Chapter 1

# Introduction to Teams

During the 1980s, the space shuttle program was NASA's major thrust. Shuttles launched, carried astronauts to space, and then returned like airplanes, landing on a runway. The liftoff of the space shuttle Challenger on January 28, 1986 seemed typical of the many other successful shuttle flights. There were seven astronauts aboard the shuttle, including for the first time a person who was not trained as an astronaut, a teacher, Christa McAuliffe. Several seconds before liftoff, the shuttle engines ignited properly as they should have. At liftoff time, all three main engines were firing as the members of the team at NASA expected them to. Soon, the shuttle left its pad and cleared the tower. Its initial ascent was as predicted, showing nothing that caused anyone to have unusual concerns. This looked like any typical shuttle launch and another success for NASA.

Unfortunately, it did not turn out to be a typical liftoff. At 73 seconds into the launch the Challenger rapidly disintegrated, virtually exploding, and all seven astronauts aboard were killed as a result, including the person who NASA had billed as the first teacher-in-space. Why did the Challenger break apart? The simplest answer is also technical one. In short, it resulted from an engineering failure of the solid rocket boosters. Morton Thiokol was the supplier of these solid-rocket boosters. On the morning of the launch, the air temperature was unusually cold – 31 degrees Fahrenheit – which is far lower than is typical for Florida for that time of year. As a result of this low temperature, the O-rings in the boosters failed to seal properly, and caused a leak which quickly developed from a small plume into a full break up within a time period of just over a minute. This would appear to blame the explosion on a complex engineering issue that NASA could not have foreseen.

*Group Dynamics and Team Interventions: Understanding and Improving Team Performance*,
First Edition. Timothy M. Franz.

Although the surface cause certainly did result from an engineering failure, the root cause requires one to delve into the group dynamics of NASA. As subsequent investigations revealed, Morton Thiokol and NASA had definitive evidence of this potential failure long before the fateful morning of the explosion. One engineer even wrote a memo suggesting that a failure like the one in the Challenger could lead to a loss of life. NASA even had ample opportunity to cancel the launch during several discussions with Morton Thiokol, the supplier of the rocker boosters. However, the key decision makers ignored these concerns and went forward anyway with the launch. Janis (1982) attributes this failure to a faulty group decision-making process, which he termed Groupthink (this is covered in more detail later in this book). Janis provides detailed evidence of how Groupthink is likely to have caused the Challenger disaster. Furthermore, Janis provides detailed methods designed to intervene in small groups such as NASA's launch team so as to help prevent these poor decisions. As a result of the Challenger disaster, NASA instituted several changes to help the launch team avoid a similar future disaster, some of which were even similar to those suggested by Janis. Did they work? In 2003, the astronauts in the space shuttle Columbia unfortunately faced a similar fate, though this time during reentry rather than at liftoff. Some scholars blame the Columbia disaster on the same symptoms of Groupthink that once again occurred at NASA (Ferraris & Carveth, 2003).

So, can teams be successful? The evidence is mixed. Some believe that teamwork can help organizations to perform beyond their expectations. Others are not so confident about the benefits of teamwork. Regardless of your bias, this book should help to provide you with a basic understanding of the way groups work and some tools to help you to make them work better.

## Learning Goals for Chapter 1

- Differentiate a group from a team.
- Understand the importance of groups and teams in organizations today.
- Understand the nature of groups and teams in organizations today.
- Understand the goal of synergy and the reality of most teams.
- Know the input-process-output model of group functioning.

## What Is a Group, What Is a Team?

One of the first questions with regard to understanding teams is to determine what a team is and how it differs from a group of people. A group can be defined as "two or more individuals who are connected to one another by social relationships" (Forsyth, 2006, pp. 2–3). This definition can be divided into its parts. The first part focuses on *two or more individuals*, meaning that groups can range from very small to very large. The second part of the definition is that there are members *who are connected to each other*, meaning that the members are somehow intertwined or

networked. The third part, *by social relationships,* emphasizes the social nature of groups, regardless of their emphasis. In summary, members are seen and see themselves as part of the group because of their connected relationships.

On the other hand, a team can be defined as "an organized, task-focused group" (Forsyth, 2006, p. 159). This definition focuses more on the structure of the group and the task that the group is performing because teams, especially those in the workplace, have specific task requirements which the organization expects members to complete and are structured in a way that should help them meet those goals. A second concept that helps to distinguish the difference between some groups and teams is *entiativity* (Campbell, 1958), or the level of "groupness" among members; teams have high levels of interaction, interdependence, and belongingness that is typical of groups with high entiativity. It is this combination of structure, task focus, and high entiativity that typically distinguishes a team from any other group.

Katzenbach and Smith (1993; 2005) break down the differences between groups and teams even further. According to their classification system, a group includes the following:

- a strong, clearly focused leader;
- a system of individual accountability;
- a purpose that is the same as that of the broader organizational mission;
- outputs that are based on individual rather than collective work products;
- an emphasis on running efficient meetings;
- a system where members measure the group's effectiveness indirectly by its influence on others (such as financial performance of the business); and
- discussions where the group makes decisions and then delegates responsibility to members or others.

On the other hand, a team includes the following:

- a process of sharing leadership roles;
- a system with both individual as well as mutual accountability;
- a specific purpose that the team itself determines;
- outputs that are based on collective rather than individual work products;
- an emphasis on open-ended discussion and active problem-solving during meetings;
- a system where members measure the team's performance directly by assessing collective work products; and
- discussions where the group makes decisions and then does the real work together.

As can be seen in all of these definitions, there is overlap between what is a group versus what is a team. Although there is disagreement about the specific definitions (see Forsyth, 2006 for an excellent summary of this debate), I conclude that a team is a specific type of group, though a group is not always a team. There

are many different social groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous support groups, that may be high in interdependence but cannot be classified as a team because they do not have the task focus that is expected of teams. On the other hand, there are no teams that cannot also be classified as groups. One of the reasons to consider the nuances of these definitions is that there is considerable research about small groups, only some of which applies directly to teams. The rest of the research may or may not be generalized to teams – it is the reader who must carefully make that determination.

## Team assessment: Are we a successful team?

The following questions are based on recommendations from Hackman (Coutu & Beschloss, 2009). Answering these questions can help you to quickly determine whether your team may or may not be as successful as it should be (Table 1.1).

This quick assessment can help you to assess how well your team is doing. Scores can range from 8 to 32. If your team scores closer to eight, your team is likely to be facing considerable issues with members and how they work together; its performance is definitely suffering and it is likely a detriment to the organization. If your team scores closer to a 32, it is likely to be helping the organization succeed. Scores in the middle represent teams that can improve performance but may not be holding the organization back.

**Table 1.1** Criteria for Successful Teams.

| Eight Criteria for Successful Teams | Strongly Disagree | Somewhat Disagree | Somewhat Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. My team has problems coordinating tasks. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 2. All team members are motivated to perform as a team. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 3. My team is made up of the wrong members. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 4. My team has clear goals and a compelling direction. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 5. My team has clear boundaries. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 6. My team has fewer than 10 members. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 7. My team has a very stable set of members. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 8. Organizations reward us as a team rather than us as individuals. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

## Teams in Organizations Today

As the previous space shuttle example illustrates, teams work together to send shuttles to the moon. They also operate on people, determine how to fight wars, decide who to hire for a position, and set the strategy for multinational corporations. In fact, organizations today require groups and teams to make far more decisions and perform many more tasks in organizations than ever before (Devine, Clayton, Philips, Dunford, & Melner, 1999; Guzzo & Shea, 1992). Furthermore, groups and teams at work are unlikely to go away any time soon (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006) because teams separated by time and distance can continue to function well with the rapid increase of technology that enables computer-mediated team meetings; individuals are expected to work in teams, and organizations expect greater outcomes from increasing their use of teams.

There are many reasons why people in organizations would want to work in teams (for a comprehensive list, see Zander, 1985). Five of the more common of these reasons include:

- *Preferences for Social Interaction*. Most people are social by nature and thus are attracted to working with others. A team provides them with this opportunity (Parks & Sanna, 1999).
- *Dividing Work*. Many tasks need to be completed quickly so as to provide organizations with a competitive advantage. However, these tasks can be very complicated and difficult for one person to complete in a timely fashion. It is much easier for team members to divide work among multiple people so that they can accomplish a greater volume of work at a faster rate (Stewart, Manz, & Sims, 1999).
- *Working Collectively to Effect Change*. Individuals often come together to plan and implement change when they think that any "one person acting alone cannot create that change" Additional members will continue to join if the group has a clear purpose with which they agree (Zander, 1985, p. 1).
- *Information Sharing*. Many complex problems require input from multiple individuals, and team members often know that they do not have the information that they need to solve these problems. Multiple members provide team members with the opportunity to increase the level of information and expertise on which to draw when compared with working alone (Franz & Larson, 2002).
- *Organizational Buy-In*. One important step to succeeding during an implementation phase is to get buy-in within all levels of an organization. Team members expect that decisions made with their participation get better buy-in among organizational members and improved commitment than will any individual decisions made by management (Scanlan & Atherton, 1981).

Although these factors affect what team members expect to get out of working in teams, they do not fully explain why most organizations have fully embraced teamwork. Social interaction, for example, is helpful to the individual members in a team. However, organizational leaders will typically look towards what that social interaction can actually provide the organization.

West (2004) provides a comprehensive list of reasons for what organizations might expect when using teams. This list can be summarized into four categories of expected organizational outcomes, including a) increased task performance, b) greater creativity, c) improved organizational learning, and d) higher employee engagement. First, organizations expect direct results in terms of task performance. Specifically, they expect teams to provide a greater quantity of work that is produced more quickly at a higher quality and is focused on the organization's goals and mission than what might be expected from those same individuals when they are working alone. Second, organizations expect greater creativity. In this case, teams are seen as resources for cross training and cross fertilization, which should result in more innovative ideas. Third, organizations expect improved organizational learning. This is because when members are working together they are more likely to learn the roles that other members perform in that team and can then pass that knowledge along when there is a change in team membership. Finally, organizations expect improved employee engagement. When people work together, they are expected to be more committed to the organization, involved in their work, and satisfied with their jobs.

As can be seen, organizations expect teams to improve organizational results, whether it results from task performance, innovation, learning, or engagement; that is the reason why organizations use teams to conduct work in so many different areas. Further, when companies today are rightfully concerned with losing their top talent, Hewlett (2009) recommends that well-functioning teams can help companies to retain some who otherwise might have "one foot out the door" (p. 24) by creating a stimulating environment with a sense of camaraderie. The type of teams these companies use include cross-functional work teams, project teams, management teams, leadership teams, task performance teams, and many other specific types.

## Types of Groups at Work

There are several different ways in which organizations use teams. According to Larson and LaFasto (1989), there are three different types of teams. The first type of team is a problem-resolution team. These are teams that are set up to solve a specific type of problem. An example of a problem-solving team is a team that is tasked with the goal to determine what the annual employee survey scores mean and then decide on a set of actions to take based on their interpretations. The second type of team is a creative team. These are teams that are designed to come up with creative and innovative solutions to a problem. An example of a creative team is one that is designed to come up with a marketing plan for a new product. The final type of team is a tactical team. A tactical team implements solutions. An example of a tactical team is one that will create a new route for a more timely and effective delivery of products. Larson and La Fasto further state that any of these teams can either be standing teams – where members work together for considerable periods – or ad hoc teams – where members work together for a short period of time and where there is a definitive end goal.