JOHNS HOPKINS
CAREY BUSINESS SCHOOL

Center for
Innovative Leadership

A FIELD GUIDE TO LEADING DYNAMIC TEAMS

About CIL Field Guides

The Center for Innovative Leadership aims to advance knowledge and build capacity for innovative leadership in modern organizations. Housed at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, the Center is a hub for new ideas and insights on leadership, combining faculty-led research, student-facing programming, and community-focused impact. The Center's thought leaders explore a range of topics related to leading modern organizations, from managing effective teams in dynamic environments, to building cultures of learning and resilience, and developing inclusive leadership practices. Learn more about CIL at carey.jhu.edu/CIL

CIL designed this Field Guide to help leaders navigate the increasingly complex world of work, armed with a nuanced understanding of key challenges identified in cutting-edge organizational research. Each Field Guide is designed to illuminate a core challenge facing today's leaders and deliver effective, evidence-based guidance and practices for leaders to deploy in their own work. This Field Guide is intended for use by leaders in all industries and at all levels of an organization, not only as a "how-to" guide for key leadership decisions and actions, but also as a broader resource for personal development, learning, and growth as a leader.

This Field Guide was authored by Sarah Nehrling, based on research by, interviews with, and feedback from CIL faculty members Prof. Michelle Barton (Johns Hopkins University) and Prof. Anna T. Mayo (Carnegie Mellon University), and drawing on the latest evidence from social science research.

Foreword from the directors

Leaders today face unique and unprecedented challenges in this turbulent post COVID-19 work environment.

Managers, supervisors and team leads are grappling with "return to work" decisions that require an intentional and delicate balancing of empathy for employee well-being and company culture with the need to optimize performance, productivity and organizational stability. At the same time, organizations and teams are facing new challenges and questions about how to work together, or even who they should be working with at all – particularly as organizations move to more flexible work arrangements and temporary team structures.

The purpose of this inaugural field guide on Leading Dynamic Teams is to provide an accessible, digestible and practical resource for leaders to think innovatively about how they structure and restructure teams within their organization. Prof. Michelle Barton and Prof. Anna Mayo highlight key practices that can be implemented quickly and seamlessly today as you reimagine how you can best run meetings, share information and allow for peer-to-peer leadership in a way that keeps employees engaged, fulfilled and productive.

We hope you discover new and effective ways to build and lead dynamic teams in this new landscape of work – one that challenges us to rethink our old ways of leading and managing in a top-down, hierarchical structure. We hope this guide provides you with new resources to be old and creative, as well as intentional and strategic. If you find this guide helpful and have applied any new approaches to leading your teams, please let us know. We'd love to hear about your success and share it with our community.

Email us at carey_cil@jhu.edu or message us on LinkedIn with your stories and feedback. **Lead on!**

Michael Doyle
Executive Director

Christopher Myers
Faculty Director

About this field guide

Times are changing so teams are changing

Teams are an important and ever-increasing part of organizational work, and today's workplace is home to more and more dynamic teams. These dynamic teams are characterized, by design or default, by rapidly changing membership, more complicated and overlapping team structures and collaborations, and blurred team boundaries.

These dynamic teams are a reaction to a changing environment. Advances in communication technology allow for more fluid exchange of information, the increasing complexity of problems require teams to adapt to the current environment's challenges, and shifts to project-based work and changes in required expertise provide the fluid membership and specializations necessary to tackle these challenges. Plus, as COVID-19 required more remote work and many team members now opt to work remotely, teams are becoming more distributed and reliant on virtual collaboration. And many of them are changing jobs at a much higher rate.

Team forms are evolving with the changing environment. Organizations make more use of temporary teams, spread expertise across teams with multiple-team membership, and change team membership regularly, all resulting in blurred team boundaries.

What does this mean for leading teams? **Leading dynamic teams requires a philosophical shift in leadership: the leader can no longer rely on stable behaviors, relationships, and knowledge to be automatically internalized and maintained by the team members.** Instead, practices, interactions, and ideas must be treated as fluctuating resources that must be given constant attention.

This puts team leaders in an increasingly critical role. To be effective, they must simultaneously manage three key elements that are vital to a dynamic team's success - as covered in this field guide:

Section 1: Manage Membership

Leaders need to manage dynamic team membership, which makes it difficult to know how to work together and even with whom to work. Best practices for this internal work involve putting the right conditions into place at the start and managing attention, through:

- **Holding team launch meetings**, short meetings at the outset of a team's work, support team effectiveness by establishing a shared understanding of both the taskwork (what are we doing) and the teamwork (how are we doing it)[i]
- **Embracing a joint problem-solving orientation**, in which teams "[view] problems as shared and solutions as requiring coproduction", which in turn makes them "better able to focus on the task, accomplish work sooner, and learn through trial and error" [ii]
- **Supporting team synchrony in communication**, monitoring when team communication rhythms are aligned, providing asynchronous communication options, and carefully considering when communication should be synchronous or asynchronous

Section 2: Manage Sensemaking

Leaders need to manage sensemaking and rapid learning in dynamic environments, to support dynamic teams in responding and adapting to volatile and uncertain external environments. Dynamic teams have the potential to be much more flexible and adaptive than their hierarchical or long-standing counterparts, but to reach this potential requires teams to develop skills in attending to, making sense of, and adapting to their changing environment, through:

- **Engaging in frequent sensemaking**, to disrupt an extreme action orientation and dysfunctional momentum in favor of noticing and adapting to cues that the situation is changing and requires different understanding and action
- **Encouraging rapid learning**, through both a learn-by-doing approach and peer-to-peer learning, learning vicariously through stories and building the team's transactive memory in the process to understand which team member can contribute what

Section 3: Manage Relationships

Leaders need to manage the relationships that underpin all organizational work, not simply focusing on making sense of a changing environment or coordinating rotating membership but also making space for the fundamental prerequisite of relational work. Enacting relational pauses is one way that leaders can strengthen members' relationships, sparking not only better capacity for teamwork but also more motivation and less stress[iii].

Introduction: Leading Dynamic Teams

The age of dynamic teams

What comes to mind when you hear the word, "workplace"? Traditionally, many would think of a factory floor, where companies invested heavily in big machinery, with confidence that their process and their product would stay the same for decades to come. Others might picture offices or cubicles, where a stable group of workers who fall into an established organizational chart gather for team meetings around a table full of coffee cups. Indeed, over the past century, much of the work done in developed countries has shifted from factory work to knowledge work. In 1920, there were two manual workers for every one knowledge worker. In 1956, there were more white-collar workers than blue-collar workers for the first time, and by 1980, white-collar workers outnumbered their blue-collar counterparts by a ratio of 2:1[iv]. Overall, though, these fairly stable manufacturing and office settings were the reality for many younger baby boomers, who nearly all commuted to work in a factory or office building and spent on average 10.1 years in each job they held[v].

Environmental changes

With the move towards knowledge-based work, teams became the fundamental building block of organizations. Advances in communication technology meant that information no longer had to trickle up an organization's hierarchy to reach the executives making decisions at the top. Rather, as information flowed more easily and fluidly, organizations could leverage teams to decentralize decision making, innovation, and so much more.

As information has become more fluid, so has the landscape in which organizational teams do their work. Problems are increasingly complex, and markets see so many environmental changes and so much volatility that we now need constant adaptation to tackle today's challenges.

By design, teams have come about to better respond to this shift in the world of work.

> "The need for dynamic teams is a progression in management organizing, in part because we're moving in a world that is far more fast-paced, volatile, dynamic and uncertain. And we're moving to fundamentally different kinds of organizations, more knowledge-based and project-based than focused on large manufacturing. If knowledge changes every few years, then what you do with that knowledge will need to change just as frequently."
>
> **Professor Michelle Barton, CIL Core Faculty member**

Changes in workers and workplace

At the same time as the world of work is adapting, so are the workers and the workplace. Both specialization and gig work are on the rise, work has become more global, and new technologies have allowed for even more new forms of communication, coordination, and work in general. Most notably, remote work, which was already trending, saw a major boost during the COVID-19 pandemic, and is continuing to increase the virtuality of our work that came with globalization and new technology[vi]. Indeed, as workers turned to remote work in March 2020, team members no longer shared an office space, and sometimes spread dispersed across additional timezones. Currently, fewer employees are coming back the office, and remote work is expected to stick[vii]. The distributed nature of team members has led to more virtual teamwork – even when individuals are working from the same building.

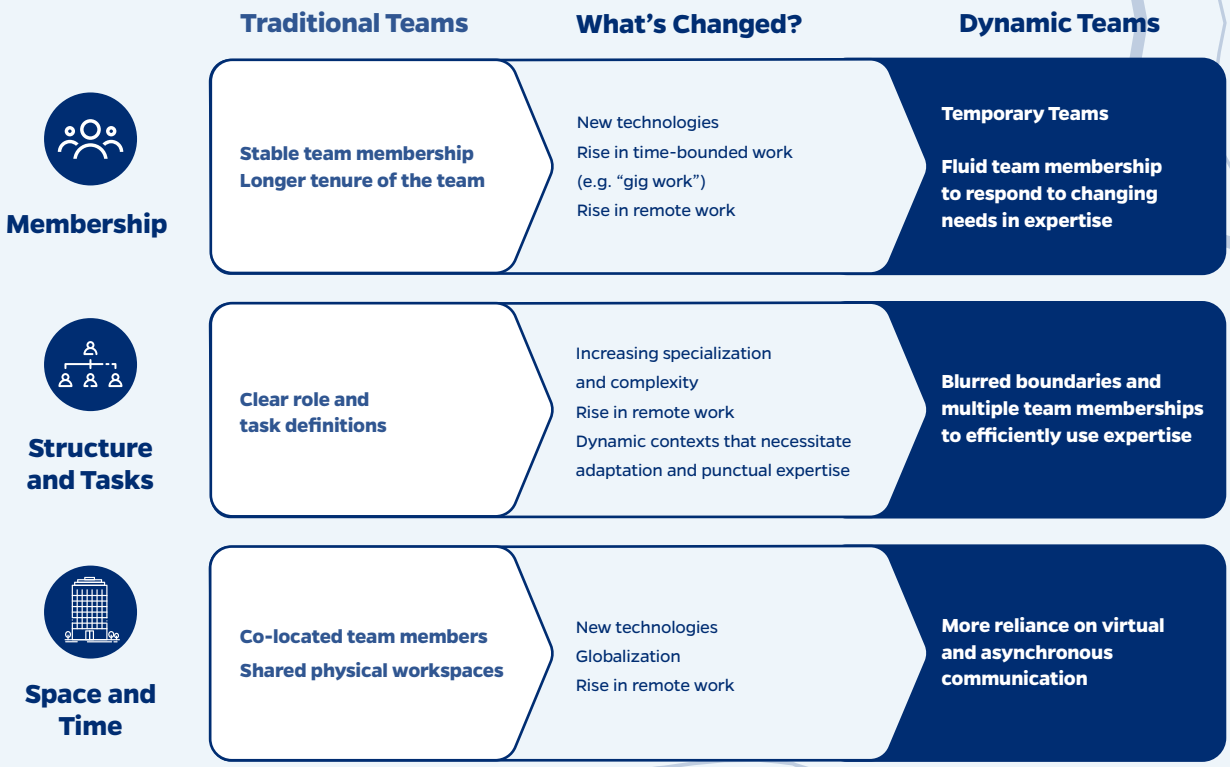
Workers' preferences are also impacting this new nature of work. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, millennials, who are now the largest segment of the US workforce, stayed at a job for less than 3 years on average, less worried about climbing the ladder than exploring the "jungle gym" of learning and earning opportunities[viii]. They are not the only ones moving from job to job; the temporary decrease in workers who voluntarily left their jobs in 2020 caught up with us in 2021, ushering in the "Great Resignation" of 47 million Americans who quit in 2021 – more than 4 million of whom quit in April 2021 alone[ix]. The remaining team members are left shuffling to respond to gaps in time and talent, including the vacancies left by 1 in 5 employees globally, across all age groups, who are expected to change employers in 2022[x].

Resulting evolutions in team forms

These changes in environment, workers and workplace have led to an evolution of team forms. Organizations are turning more often to **temporary teams** to respond to emergent issues, and leaders are attempting to efficiently allocate specialized expertise to teams by assigning individuals across multiple teams at once, making **multiple-team membership** more common. As work evolves and shifts in the environment require different expertise, members come and go, creating **fluid team membership**. As a result of these constant changes, team boundaries are blurred. Finally, to add to these layers and movements, many problems are so large and complex that they require "teams of teams," or **multi-team systems**, where each team must coordinate with other teams within the system. In these multi-team systems, any one team is often dependent on work being done elsewhere, by at least one other team.

In short, the shifting landscape has enabled the emergence of new team forms that offer the hope of being more adaptive and externally focused. These new team forms differ from more traditional teams in terms of their temporality, boundary, and space (see Figure 1), and the changes are testing leaders' ability to support the robust teaming that today's problems demand.

Figure 1:
Traditional v. Dynamic Teams



What does this mean for leaders?

Some leaders may have proactively designed their team to be dynamic. Other leaders may have found themselves suddenly thrust into a dynamic environment and needing to react to accommodate the new default of change and uncertainty in the world of work. Regardless of whether they arrived by design or default, dynamic teams are here to stay, as are the opportunities and challenges of leading these dynamic teams.

There is extensive literature on how to lead teams, but it draws on a traditional definition of a team as "a bounded and stable set of individuals interdependently working for a common purpose"[xi]. These bounded and stable teams would learn and perform together, becoming increasingly effective as they “come to know and effectively use each member's relevant skills, knowledge, and experiences"[xii]. So what does it mean to lead a dynamic team that does not have this characteristic stability? We might start by considering the static noun of “team” as outdated, and rather adopt a verb form, teaming, to describe "teamwork on the fly", "a way to gather experts in temporary groups to solve problems they're encountering for the first and perhaps only time".

We can assume, then, that leading a dynamic team might build on traditional team leadership in some ways, but may require adapted or even radically different leadership skills and moves in other ways.

What stays the same? In both static and dynamic teams, the leader aims to make the team effective and worthwhile. The goal of any team – static or dynamic – is to become more than the sum of its parts[xiii]. The team should successfully deliver the desired results, it should adapt and learn through effective teamwork, and individual team members should be satisfied and learn[xiv]. This requires the leader to set a clear vision (What is the result we are trying to deliver?), be clear about why the team is coming together (Why do we need to increase complexity by involving others if one person can accomplish the task just as well as a team?), and attend to the well-being and development of each individual member (Are team members thriving as a result of the experience, or simply going through the motions of working in the team?).

However, the way to get to these three goals may look very different in dynamic teams and requires leaders to rethink their behaviors and refocus their attention on a few key challenges. At the most fundamental level, leaders of dynamic teams have to accept that their work will be ongoing, and that they will need to engage in ongoing iterations of behaviors and strategies to match their leadership to the changing nature and work of a dynamic team. In static teams, the design of tasks and roles, and the launch of the team’s collaborative process, are activities that occur early in the team’s life and become part of the accepted norms and practices among members. By contrast, in dynamic teams, leaders need to be attentive to frequently and strategically engaging in re-design and re-launch of the team as its members or environment evolve. Likewise, the management of the team’s process needs to be constantly evaluated and adjusted as new team members, new information, new objectives, or new constraints alter the team’s trajectory.

In other words, leading dynamic teams requires a philosophical shift in leadership: the leader can no longer rely on stable behaviors, relationships, and knowledge to be automatically internalized and maintained by the team members. Instead, practices, interactions, and ideas must be treated as fluctuating resources that must be given constant attention.

This Field Guide focuses on three facets of dynamic teams that require leaders' attention:

1. **Managing dynamic team membership**
   What do leaders do when their teams are gaining and losing members on a frequent basis? How do leaders enable the team to effectively work together, or even know with whom they should be working?

2. **Managing learning and sensemaking in dynamic environments**
   How do leaders prepare their teams to adapt to not only their internal changes, but also to a work environment that has increasingly volatile resources and demands? How do leaders help teams recognize and adjust to uncertain circumstances?

3. **Managing the relationships underneath it all**
   How do leaders help teams build their relational resources more quickly to be able to trust, understand, and rely on frequently changing members? How can leaders build their teams' capacity to deal with the emotional challenges of an uncertain, volatile environment?

Section 1: Manage Membership

Leaders need to manage dynamic team membership

Whatever changes in membership may happen on a team, that team still needs to share fundamental information and coordinate tasks to accomplish its work. A static team builds and modifies its culture and knowledge over time, both of which reside in the team members themselves. When membership in dynamic teams is fluid, porous, and unpredictable, shifts in membership can result in a change or loss of these elements. As a result, dynamic teams often struggle with understanding who can do what and how to call on those skills and experiences when most helpful to the team. It is a leader's responsibility, then, to build and maintain the team's ability to effectively launch their working relationships and adapt their practices as new problems arise.

> A strong leader ensures that new team members are welcomed into the team and its way of working, as "[W]hat happens in the first few minutes of [members'] time together carries forward throughout a significant portion of the [team's] life."
>
> **J.R. Hackman and R. Wageman, 2005**

Launching (and re-launching) dynamic teams

When a team's members change, or new members are joining the team, a leader may struggle with how to welcome them. Is it time for a team-building exercise or a one-on-one orientation? Or is it better to simply throw them into the team and have them figure things out? Research by CIL Affiliate Faculty member Professor Anna Mayo suggests a different route altogether: hold a launch meeting[xv].

Team launches, short meetings at the outset of a team's work, support team effectiveness by establishing a shared understanding of both the taskwork (what are we doing) and the teamwork (how are we doing it)[xvi].

Planning and executing a team launch used to be straightforward, as the tasks and teams were relatively clear and stable. Today's teams, however, often have only a relatively stable core set of members and a shifting set of more peripheral, temporary contributors. There may also be a limited understanding of longer-term membership, as it may not be clear at the start of the project whose expertise will be needed for what changes in the environment. Still, even with this ever-changing team composition, the team can still benefit from team launch principles to build an initial understanding of who can do what and how to call on those skills and experiences when most helpful to the team.

What does a team launch look like for a dynamic team?

When might a team need to relaunch and when might it integrate a new member without relaunching? Research with hospital teams that had a relatively stable core (the primary medical team) and more shifting set of peripheral contributors (nurses, specialists, social workers, etc.) suggests that a team launch including solely the core members can set the stage for success[xviii]. The core members in these hospital teams held an initial conversation about the different peripheral contributor roles and how to work with these contributors, creating a shared mental model of teamwork for their external collaboration, which led to more integration of these external contributors. The core members also met every Monday morning for a conversation on how to work together as a core group, clarifying their shared mental model of the teamwork internal to the core group. These conversations, both contributing to awareness about how relevant individuals outside of the core were to the work, led to more collaboration within the core team itself. When teams better coordinated internally and externally, they worked together more efficiently, spending less time on patient rounds and seeing a reduction in patients' length of stay, and they also reported learning more.

This research suggests that, given the critical role of collaboration and shared mental models within the core team, that core team may need to re-launch when undergoing changes in membership. When there are changes in peripheral membership, however, it may be sufficient for one core member to orient the new peripheral member to the task at hand, making sure that the core team ultimately integrates and synthesizes all input from varied sources.

Anna Mayo suggests that we often overlook these efforts to orient and integrate the more peripheral contributors. "We skip this step a lot in consulting. A team is going along, building some shared history and understanding, and then they bring on an expert," Mayo explains. "The team doesn't know what the expert knows, the expert doesn't know about the team's history or understanding, or what they're trying to accomplish – and yet, there's very little orienting that happens. And then everyone is surprised when it doesn't work out."

Why not invest in get-to-know-you activities?

In a dynamic team with fluid participation from meeting to meeting, leaders may lean toward running get-to-know-you activities, maybe even a team-building retreat. However, investing in these relationship-building moves can be a futile exercise. "The attempt to focus on building a relationship doesn't really help us if you might be leaving the team before the next meeting," says Mayo[xix].

Rather than a prolonged onboarding and team-building process, new members of a dynamic team can often benefit from getting right to work. "Getting to the task is useful; just understanding that we are doing this task together means that we're going to be sharing information, and a byproduct could be a relationship."[xx] But be prepared – this work may be a bit messy at first. Unlike static teams, with clearly defined roles and a strong sense of who knows what, built on years working together, dynamic teams have a weaker and constantly evolving sense of pre-existing knowledge and routines for working together.

Embracing a joint problem-solving orientation

Regardless of how new team members are brought on board the team, they will very quickly face problems, from the routine operational challenge to the serious and urgent threat. Some teams tend to treat problem-solving as an individual task, sometimes even taking the view that if you noticed the problem, it is yours to resolve. Such an approach can leave that team member feeling isolated from the team, exhausted by the challenge of working with their own limited knowledge and resources, and as a result, even more reticent to voice and discuss problems in the future.

High-performing dynamic teams, on the other hand, have **a joint problem-solving orientation**; they "[view] problems as shared and solutions as requiring coproduction", which in turn makes them "better able to focus on the task, accomplish work sooner, and learn through trial and error"[xxi] Simply framing something as a problem to be solved can invite collaboration, as people recognize that problems require analysis and benefit from considering alternatives, which can allow teams to actively integrate diverse information.

While this integration has been shown to be critical in dynamic teams, it becomes difficult when the boundaries around who is “in” a given team, who can offer up this information to analyze and help solve the problem, are blurred. Even in more stable environments, there is striking disagreement about who is a team member[xxii].

Research conducted by Anna Mayo focused on teams composed of representatives from both a health clinic and a nonprofit organization[xxiii], where the members of these teams not only came and went, but also spanned the boundaries of their two sectors. These divides, or **“knowledge boundaries”**[ii], proved to be "thick and difficult" to traverse.

Knowledge boundaries arise in teams for reasons including differing expertise (Weingart, Todorova, & Cronin, 2010), geographical distance (Lee, Mazmanian, & Perlow, 2020), culture and demographics (Jang, 2017), and organizational membership (Zuzul, 2019). Extensive research shows that different groups bring distinct knowledge sets, inhabiting "different thought worlds" (Dougherty, 1992), with differences in values, perspectives, and technical languages (Carlile, 2004).

The research revealed that, despite fluid membership and thick knowledge boundaries, when team members adopted a joint problem-solving orientation, they were more likely to succeed. Similar to the teams who held launch meetings to discuss core and peripheral responsibilities, these teams also benefited from a shared mindset about the team; in this case, that mindset was one of “integrative framing”, seeing the work as truly shared.

These teams with the joint problem-solving orientation engaged in three conversational moves to exchange information and resources:

1. **Inviting** one another to problem-solve
2. **Asking** the other to know how to proceed
3. **Offering** points such as resources and ideas to help the work proceed[xxiv]

A leader looking to cultivate a joint problem-solving orientation in their team may do well to model these three conversational moves, as well as to systematically introduce them to team members – starting with the launch meeting - until they become part of a team's routines and norms.

Characteristics of a Joint Problem-Solving Orientation

In the study on joint problem-solving orientation, five items were used to measure respondents' perception of this orientation within their teams, looking at both how respondents view the situation and the actual behaviors of team members[xxv].

When considering the extension to which their current team has a Joint Problem-Solving Orientation, a leader might consider these five items, and even bring them to the team for discussion.

1. "Problems arising in this engagement are seen as joint rather than individual responsibilities"
2. "I view the other party as a true partner"
3. "We always ask one another questions to understand how best to proceed"
4. "Each party always offers important points to help our work together proceed"
5. "We absolutely invite one another to be part of the problem-solving process"

Supporting Team Synchrony

Launching and re-launching teams can support a recognition of team norms, and these launches as well as a joint problem-solving orientation can build a shared mindset about who the team is, how they collaborate, and how they approach problems. But how do they learn how to move from understanding norms and collaboration to having the communication structures that support this ongoing and fluid collaboration?

In static teams, members learn about each other's expertise and how to collaborate with each other over time and experience, trial and error. Dynamic teams do not have that same luxury, given their unstable nature. To surmount these boundaries, dynamic teams will require rethinking and adapting traditional team communication structures and practices. The launch meeting can provide an opportunity to introduce and reinforce the team's various existing communication structures. But ongoing attention to these communication practices – and particularly monitoring asynchronous communication platforms – is a key task for leaders of dynamic teams.

As members join and teams shift, formal communication structures may seem outdated and overwhelming; does every team need to do a weekly stand-up? Does this mailing list even reflect the current members of this team? Does each new member need to join yet another communication platform? In a dynamic team, with shifting members who are in varying timezones, often virtual, and themselves juggling multiple distinct teams, even deciding on when to meet and who to invite poses a challenge. Still, synchronous interactions like videoconferences help in reading nonverbal cues and picking up on subtle meanings[xxvi]; asynchronous communication systems in particular, such as Slack and Microsoft Teams, might provide a few opportunities that are particularly relevant to dynamic teams.

Studies have shown that interactions on asynchronous platforms that occur in a more synchronous or "bursty" pattern, with brief periods of high activity where team members are posting and responding more often and more quickly to each other – even despite timezone differences – is correlated with performance/collective intelligence[xxvii]. This work suggests that these patterns of interaction reflect "joint attention"; we are paying attention to the work and we know the other person or team is paying attention to the work as well. Scholars suggest that this joint attention can facilitate the ability to get work done more efficiently, with better integration of information, while also providing an important sense of connectedness[xxviii]. Leaders can leverage this research by using asynchronous tools and options that not only allow for monitoring this burstiness, but also encourage it, for example by letting members see when others are online or follow what they are working on[xxix].

While asynchronous work has its conveniences and benefits, it cannot be the default for all communication. It is becoming incredibly important to consider what tasks and situations work best with this asynchronous communication, and what tasks and situations will truly benefit from synchronous communication. It may be that coordination efforts are best done asynchronous, whereas more collaborative, integrative work is best done synchronously. Particularly in teams that are composed of members from different departments or organizations, these synchronous, informal interactions enable team members to "mutually adjust their activities and better integrate their work"[xxx]. These exchanges are critical to not only coordinating immediate work, but also learning who on the team has specific expertise that can be leveraged for this and future tasks.

Section 2: Manage Sensemaking

Leaders need to manage sensemaking and rapid learning in dynamic environments

As we've seen, dynamic teams require active and intentional leadership to manage their dynamic membership. Still, dynamic teams face a larger challenge than adjusting to this and other internal changes; they must also respond and adapt to volatile and uncertain external environments. In fact, for many organizations, the great promise of dynamic teams is that they have the potential to be far more flexible and adaptive than more hierarchical structures or even traditional, long-standing teams. However, realizing that potential requires that teams develop skills in attending to, making sense of and adapting to their changing environment. Engaging in frequent **sensemaking** and aiding rapid learning can support these adaptations.

Sensemaking:

"interactive practices and processes that enable ways of thinking and acting to make sense of the ambiguity and facilitate swift, coordinated action."[xxxii]

Engaging in Frequent Sensemaking

While dynamic teams may feel the pressure to keep getting things done, even in the face of uncertainty about the future and the present, this kind of extreme **action orientation** is risky. It can cause teams to end up enacting plans and processes based on assumptions that are no longer valid[xxxi]. The more uncertain and dynamic the environment, the more important it is that a team steps back to engage in frequent sensemaking.

Sensemaking involves re-evaluating a situation and giving meaning to what is happening. It is what we do when we ask and answer the question, "What's the story here?" and "What should I do about it?" When teams fail to update their understanding of a swiftly evolving situation, they fall into **dysfunctional momentum**: they continue with a failing course of action because they have failed to notice or understand emerging indications that the situation is not – or is no longer – what they thought it was. They do not pause and re-evaluate. Many times, organizational norms that reward enacting plans, not reconsidering them, can even exacerbate dysfunctional momentum.

When the environment is volatile or uncertain, it is especially important to update our thinking regularly. Research on teams that do this updating well suggest several practices that disrupt dysfunctional momentum and help teams align their actions to the changing reality around them:

1. Anomalize rather than normalize

Critical shifts and trends in the environment often start with little discrepancies, such as a slight increase in the normal sales cycle, an uptick in the number of safety violations, or maybe a small but odd technical failure. Performance pressures and the drive for action often lead teams to normalize such cues, ignoring them or explaining them away as being close enough to normal not to matter. Yet these cues can be valuable early indicators that events are not unfolding as planned or that something within the overall system is starting to break down[xxxiii]. Research suggests that when dealing with an uncertain and volatile environment, effective teams **anomalize** rather than **normalize**. Anomalizing involves "taking proactive steps to become alert to discrepancies, to understand them more completely, and to be less encumbered by history"[xxxiv]. Not only does anomalizing provide critical insight and data that teams may need; the very act of looking for anomalies “disrupts the momentum of ongoing events, triggers doubt and motivates renewed efforts to make sense"[xxxv]. It is enough of a mental pause to break the dysfunctional momentum.

2. Encourage voice

If team members notice anomalies but don’t feel comfortable bringing them up, their insight becomes moot. Thus, it is critical that leaders encourage voice[xxxvi], speaking up and sharing concerns, even if there is some ambiguity about the meaning of what they’ve noticed. New team members may be especially reticent to voice what they are noticing, for fear they have misunderstood a fundamental piece of their work, or that they will be perceived as technically incompetent. The trust built throughout the launch and collaborative work can support a team member in feeling comfortable voicing these anomalies to the team.

3. Seek diverse perspectives

Another way to disrupt momentum is to deliberately seek out different information or perspectives that will trigger new ways of thinking or interpreting the situation. Each new perspective adds insight to a situation, providing a richer, more complex but more accurate understanding of what is happening; for example, financial experts can help trace the likely costs of a particular set of actions, while marketing experts provide insight into likely customer reactions. But different perspectives need not just be functional. Brand-new employees may notice that the team is making critical, and possibly problematic, assumptions that have long since become routine to the old hands. Clients or customers can share needs that never occurred to a team. Moreover, beyond adding critical data or insight, each new perspective shakes up the existing 'story' that team members are telling themselves about their actions and the environment. These new perspectives cause teams to update their thinking, potentially disrupting what might have become dysfunctional momentum. Finally, by seeking out or explicitly welcoming divergent perspectives, leaders send the message that they don't have all the answers, reinforcing a norm that voice is critical[xxxvii].

4. Maintain situated humility

It can be difficult for team leaders to find the balance between demonstrating competence and confidence while simultaneously welcoming concerns, different perspectives and updated analyses of their situation. Research suggests that leaders who accomplish this demonstrate **situated humility**. A leader with situated humility remains confident in their own skills and abilities, while also recognizing and conveying to their team that the situation is so dynamic, complex and uncertain that no one individual can be fully knowledgeable and no situational assessment can be perfect or stable[xxxviii].

"An attitude of wisdom"

Seasoned firefighters are constantly anomalizing; they approach every fire as a new and unique fire to be explored and understood. Despite having managed countless fires, they "believe that fire is so unpredictable, so inherently unmanageable, that it can never be fully understood. As a result, they question and test their own assumptions and welcome the interruptions that may revise them." [xxxix] Social psychologist Karl Weick called this an **"attitude of wisdom"**.

An experienced leader might adopt this same attitude of wisdom. She has led countless teams through changes and challenges in a variety of situations, and yet she understands that each team and each situation is unique and complex. Instead of assuming that she has correctly identified the new challenge in front of her and that she knows how to solve it with her current team, she makes space for new information and challenges to her beliefs. She continues to notice and voice uncertainties, engage in sensemaking with the team, and problem-solve for the actual problem at hand.

Encouraging Rapid Learning

Of course, noticing and understanding what is happening in a volatile environment is not sufficient. Teams also must determine **how** to adjust, frequently in situations they have never faced before. This adjustment requires a great deal of **rapid learning**. As with any team, dynamic teams need to constantly learn about each other and the work. However, dynamic teams must continue this learning in the face of ever-changing team membership and the larger unpredictable environment in which they work. Leaders of dynamic teams should be encouraging, systematizing, and modeling how learning can happen within the team.

One way leaders can help improve a dynamic team's ability to adapt is to more proactively adopt a **learn-by-doing** approach. We see the success of this learn-by-doing approach in dynamic teams that form in response to emergencies.

For example, in the California outbreak of Exotic Newcastle Disease (END) in 2002-2003, which threatened the entire US poultry industry, the challenge of a new type of outbreak was unfolding at the same time as the task force managing the outbreak was changing in size and composition regularly. They had undertaken preplanning, based in large part on lessons from the END outbreak in commercial flocks in the 1970s, but three days after the official outbreak announcement, they had to throw out this preplanning because it no longer applied; this outbreak was happening not in commercial flocks but in small backyard flocks, and it was spreading incredibly rapidly[xl].

The 10-agency task force that formed was receiving on average 40 new employees from federal, state, and private sector every day, many of whom worked on a rotating schedule.

This rotating team was facing completely new challenges in trying to contain the outbreak in these backyard flocks, including: coordinating with more owners, some of whom spoke only Spanish; fighting against a quicker flock-to-flock spread as birds and their owners moved around the neighborhood; and detecting cases by going door-to-door instead of relying on self-reporting. Their eventual success came from learning, pivoting, and communicating throughout. To reach the Hispanic backyard bird owners alone, they tried a handful of options, ranging from a toll-free hotline to hanging posters at rest stops to including materials about END with municipal water bills. As they learned more about this specific outbreak's challenges and tried to find the most effective solutions, they continuously wrote and revised their Standard Operating Procedures. One manager noted: "You should preplan, they should be written out ahead of time, but no matter how good you pre-planned, the actual response won't fit what you preplanned for." After growing the task force to thousands of employees and 5 states, and depopulating 4.5 million birds, the task force successfully tracked, contained, and eradicated END[xli].

While learning by doing has its advantages, dynamic teams have neither the time nor the resources for each member to learn from their own work and the experiences at hand. Plus, one's own experience may not be sufficient to generate the insights needed to overcome new challenges. In order to adapt to a rapidly changing environment, team members must also learn from each other.

Teams can surface and share each of its member's past experiences that connect to a challenge in the team's current environment, combining theme to generate new or creative solutions to a current problem.

This **peer-to-peer learning** often takes place in the kinds of informal, synchronous interactions highlighted earlier, and help the team build an understanding of who knows what in the team – what research has termed the team's **transactive memory system**.

What is a Transactive Memory System?

A Transactive Memory System, or TMS, is "a shared mental map, built through team interaction, of where knowledge resides".

In a TMS, "Individuals who are part of a TMS assume responsibility for different knowledge domains, and rely on one another to access each other's expertise across domains." While a TMS will develop naturally in a group."

Why is it important?

Being deliberate about creating an effective TMS has been shown to improve team performance, because the clarity about knowledge roles gives team members quick and coordinated access to individual team members' specialized knowledge, ensuring that a greater amount of task-relevant knowledge is utilized by the entire team[xlii].

This informal, peer-to-peer learning is especially valuable in dynamic teams, where management is hesitant to invest in any one member's formal learning for the short amount of time they stay with the team. Half of the team may have left before an annual learning review! CIL Faculty Director Christopher Myers suggests that a leader might leverage and boost storytelling as a means of ensuring the team's ongoing **vicarious learning** – learning from the lessons shared by other team members about their past work experiences. When team members share stories with one another, and engage in back-and-forth discussion and interaction, they turn the raw experience someone had into "novel insights and prospective knowledge for future use."[xliii]

Sharing stories, chatting in the hallway, visiting the #random Slack channel, talking about family and pets at an in-person or virtual happy hour – all are opportunities for team members to learn about how and with whom to best work to resolve a new challenge or tackle a big project, all in service of the team's shared goal. Leaders play a central role in creating spaces for, modeling, encouraging, and highlighting the value of such informal communication amongst team members.

Section 3: Manage Relationships

Leaders need to manage the relationships underpinning organizational work

Focusing on the cognitive work of making sense of a changing environment or the structural work of coordinating an ever-rotating cast of team members might seem like the most efficient road to leading a high-performing dynamic team, but it overlooks a fundamental prerequisite: the relational work of managing a team.

Underneath all of the efforts described above is a need to attend to the fundamental experience of working in a dynamic team. Beyond the logistical challenges of having new members, completing new tasks, or facing new environments, working in a dynamic team poses more existential questions for individuals. These questions can be confusing and distracting, impeding their ability to keep track of what is going on, what they should be doing, how they feel about the team, or even just who their team even is.

Volatile, uncertain environments, and the emotional upheaval that they provoke, can create a great deal of stress and anxiety for teams. The anxiety in turn triggers psychological defense mechanisms which, along with an overwhelm of negative emotions, lead team members to blame others, lash out, get impatient or draw away from others. This behavior undermines the very collaboration and cooperation that teams rely on to get work done. Teams can get caught in this vicious cycle, from anxiety to defense behaviors to interpersonal conflict to poor team performance, which elicits more anxiety and starts the cycle over.

What's worse is that, in some teams, members have to filter these emotions and guard against reactions from other team members. This additional work makes them even more exhausted and cognitively loaded, to the point where they don't have sufficient cognitive space to engage in sensemaking or problem-solving[xliv].

> "You can tell teams that they need to communicate better or interact in more effective ways. You can put in place useful structures or practices. But if they are overwhelmed by stress, frustration, or personal conflict, they probably won't be able to implement these. They can't work effectively if they're busy pointing fingers at each other, being anxious and defensive. So one of the most important skills teams can develop is the ability to build strong, resilient relationships."
>
> **Professor Michelle Barton, CIL Core Faculty member**

Enacting Relational Pauses

To stop the vicious cycle, it is critical that teams work to build and reinforce their relationships. Strong relationships spark not only better capacity for teamwork but also more motivation to engage in this teamwork while reducing stress and burnout[xlv].

Managing relationships has always been important, but when teams and their environments are dynamic, there are both more challenges to relationships – for example, more anxiety from fluid membership and high uncertainty, which drive more anxiety-driven behaviors – and also a more limited ability to connect deeply with colleagues. In static teams, members can develop a relationship with one another over time and with repeated interactions, which also allow them to experience a fuller range of emotions with one another. It is tempting to assume that a team where membership is fluid could side-step relational issues, as individuals only work with one another for a little while before the task changes or members leave. In reality, these same relational challenges and opportunities shape the work of dynamic teams as much or more than in static teams. Indeed, in a dynamic team, it can be even more important to be explicit about supporting the team's emotional experience and relational connections, as fluid membership and high uncertainty heighten the emotional stakes. Dynamic teams have to be even more proactive and deliberate about building and fostering strong relating skills.

One best practice for this relational skills-building is to enact relational pauses. A **relational pause** is a lot like other types of operational pauses. For example, medical teams often call a time-out for a safety check, and project teams might have a status check. The difference here, though, is that the purpose of a relational pause is to shift the group's focus "from what members are doing to how they are feeling and interrelating in order to actively face up to and manage anxiety."[xlvi]

There are four steps to a relational pause

1 Step 1 Time Out

The first step is to call a time-out. Sometimes this happens when people in the group are showing signs of distress. Someone is rolling their eyes in frustration during a meeting.

A team member is lashing out or shouting. Someone has suddenly stopped talking or contributing. Calling for a time out is a way of saying, “Hold it. Something is going on here that we need to deal with rather than avoid.” But importantly, by calling for and engaging in a relational pause, team members must acknowledge that what is happening belongs to them as a team; this is not one person’s anger or frustration or fear. Just as anomalies can be indicators of systemic problems, individual distress is an indicator of relational problems, a small signal that something within the team’s relational system is breaking down. Thus, the anxiety and distress belong to not just the person most impacted, but to the group as a whole.

Taking this first step to call for a time out can be challenging, as it involves the vulnerability of confronting emotions and the momentum breaking of setting aside the task work. Some teams attempt to make this shift easier, and to build it into their way of working, by institutionalizing emotional check-ins at regular team meetings, as part of a loss ritual, or even as a part of a wellness initiative. For example, the leader might introduce a new practice of asking a question at each meeting about members' emotional state, such as "What is creating anxiety or frustration?" They might tie an emotional check-in to moments of loss, to model and encourage humanness and vulnerability in these moments. They might even include a relational pause practice in a series of wellness activities that encourage mental health. All of these regular practices can build a team member's comfort with calling for a relational pause at other moments, notably when they notice that emotions are escalating[xlvii].

2 Step 2 Share and listen

The second step of the relational pause involves an exchange similar to storytelling. Members share with one another what they are experiencing: what has happened to them, and critically, how they are feeling. This is not a psychotherapy session, but rather an authentic conversation about what each person is genuinely experiencing. As one person shares their experience, other members actively listen, demonstrate compassion, and acknowledge the validity of others' feelings, recognizing that each person may have a different reaction to the situation. Acknowledging different experiences is especially important because when teams ignore or sideline someone who is struggling more or differently than others, it can cause fractures in a team that ultimately undermine its ability to function

Leaders may need to help members stay in this emotional experience conversation for longer than might feel natural at first; members might want to rush to find a solution, but the goal of this step is simply to share and be heard. As Michelle Barton says, a relational pause helps remind us that "we are all human, not the simplified versions of humans but complex emotional creatures... We accept each other for who we truly are, as opposed to the simplistic labels that teams tend to put on each other."

In addition, as members share their experiences, they loosen the grip of those emotions. What had been anxiety held by one member of the team, creating emotional exhaustion and added work as they try to contain it or even hide it from others, is now diffused across team members, leaving that original anxiety holder lighter, better able to process their experience and think clearly[xlviii].

3 Step 3 Reflect and learn

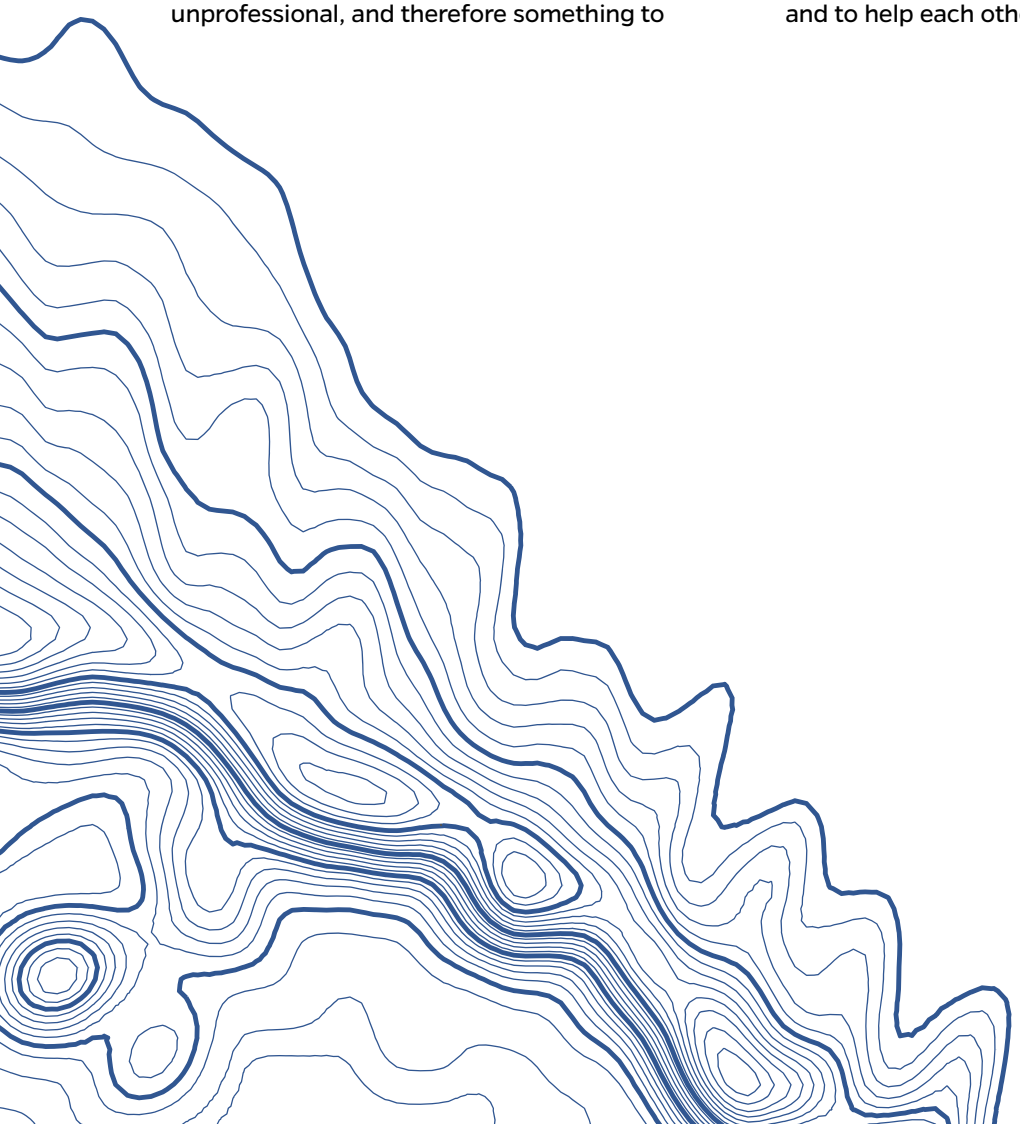
Once people are less in the grip of overwhelming emotion and able to see each other in more realistic ways, they can move to the third step of a relational pause: considering and discussing how these experiences have impacted their interactions. For example, they might reflect on how they have been treating each other, what assumptions they have been making about each other, and how those assumptions have impacted their overall work processes. This conversation should not involve blaming or finger pointing, but rather objectively noting how the members' emotional experiences have impacted the ways they interact.

4 Step 4 Problem-solve

Having taken an objective look at their interactions, team members can now begin to repair or improve any dysfunctional interpersonal patterns. They can discuss new approaches to communication and coordination or new processes for working together. This discussion will naturally lead to a transition back to focusing on task work.

Note that problem-solving is the very last step of a relational pause. One of the most common errors that teams make when trying to grapple with distress and conflict is to jump too soon into problem-solving. It can be tempting to see emotions as a weakness, and discussing them as unprofessional, and therefore something to avoid. But emotions are very much a part of work, especially for dynamic teams. We ignore them at our peril! As Barton says, the goal of a relational pause is "to surface and acknowledge the emotional reality of work that might otherwise be ignored, and to actively help group members engage productively with that reality."

Enacting relational pauses takes some skill but has its rewards. When teams undergo relational pauses regularly, they not only get better at it, but the work of a relational pause builds stronger connections between members. These strengthened connections leave teams better equipped to face the next challenge together, and to help each other through it.



Conclusion: The promise of dynamic teams

The static team is all but disappearing. Gone are the days of the simple org chart, the printed directory, and the nameplates glued to doors. No longer can individuals work as repetitive cogs in a machine producing the same output, where the cogs and the belt and the factory stay the same. Proactively and reactively adapting to internal and external changes, dynamic teams move and shift in all ways and directions! At the software company Valve, employees move their desks around so frequently that the desks have wheels, they move between floors in freight elevators, and an internal program generates a dynamic map based on where in the building each desk is currently plugged in[xlix]. At other companies, there is no office to go into at all; 16% of US companies were already fully remote in 2019[l].

And these shifts are far from over. While some companies are moving to hybrid work as we speak, others like Yelp, Airbnb, and 3M are doubling down on their pandemic shift to allow employees to work remotely indefinitely[li]. In a survey in 2021, 74% of respondents reported having immediate team members in different timezones, and an incredible 39% of respondents worked for companies that operated in at least 6 different timezones[lii]. Team members will continue to change, too, as part of a growing project-based approach that brings contractors, service providers, app developers, and gig workers – along with their flexibility, immediate and specific support, and lower overhead – into the workforce[liii].

Leading a team as if it were still the static team of the past would be an unpleasant and ineffective experience for the leader, team members, and organization. Leading these dynamic teams requires both structure and flexibility, both proactive and reactive moves. From managing dynamic team membership to supporting sensemaking and learning as the environment changes, to ensuring that the relational work that underpins team performance is a part of how the team works and relates, leaders of dynamic teams must recognize the challenges and leverage the strengths and opportunities of these increasingly dynamic teams.

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