



Pam Jones is a programme director at Ashridge responsible for the *Performance through People* programme. She is an accredited Ashridge coach.

Email: pam.jones@ashridge.org.uk



Viki Holton is a senior researcher at the Ashridge Centre for Business and Society. Her research areas include management and career development, HR, equal opportunities and the development of women managers.

Email: viki.holton@ashridge.org.uk

Teams today – taking the strain

Drawing on in-depth research, Pam Jones and Viki Holton explore the communication, organisational support and the different skills and competencies required to lead and work in complex teams.

As Ashridge tutors, developers and researchers, we are in daily contact with managers at all levels. Whilst pursuing our passion for helping teams to function as well as they possibly can, we are in a unique position to pick up on growing issues and trends. In this article we focus on one particular and salient area: the enormous challenges and pressures that team leaders face in working and adapting to life in a complex team.

One particular trend we have identified is the increasing struggle experienced by team leaders in leading and managing their teams. The examples below illustrate just a few of the issues they face.

- A marketing manager who recently moved into a new international role is struggling with the pressure of travelling around Europe to visit his team. This is increasing his work load and having a major impact on personal and family life. He feels this is no longer sustainable but is unsure about what to do.
- A team leader receives very poor 360° feedback rating from her team. When we delved into a possible reason it was evident that the team had recently become dispersed. The team leader was struggling with how to communicate effectively with them, evident in the feedback which stated that they were feeling abandoned, lacking support, and unclear about the overall team objective.
- A manager struggles to bring together an international development team with members spread across Japan, USA and UK. Cultural differences and conflicting time zones mean that often misunderstandings occur which seem to be developing into conflict.
- A team leader responsible for delivering sales results has a dispersed team who do not report directly into her. Her challenge is to create a common goal for this team, encourage them to deliver results and influence their line managers so that the team has the space and support to achieve.

We refer to these teams as complex teams. A complex team may include some of the following characteristics¹:

- Virtual (ie never or very rarely meets up)
- Geographically dispersed
- Working across time zones
- Multi cultural
- Working on complex problems
- Multidisciplinary
- Working in a partnership or joint venture with another organisation.

The reality of teams

The examples above are not unusual. We were particularly concerned with the fact that many managers we meet are thrust into complex team roles with very little support, and have to operate a 'sink or swim approach' to leading their team.

Combined with this, other research indicates that the failure rate of teams (in terms of not achieving goals) can be as high as 50%². Previous research³ conducted by Ashridge also drew attention to the fact people are also being stretched across teams, with 69% of the sample reporting that they work with five or more teams. This is especially concerning when there are indications that individual effectiveness diminishes in this environment⁴.

During 2005 we carried out a research project to look into how team leaders, their teams and the organisations they work in, are responding to the demands of operating in our more complex, global business environment. The data from our sample indicated that indeed our teams are working in a very complex environment, not only in terms of the types of team but also the number of teams they work in, and the size of these teams.

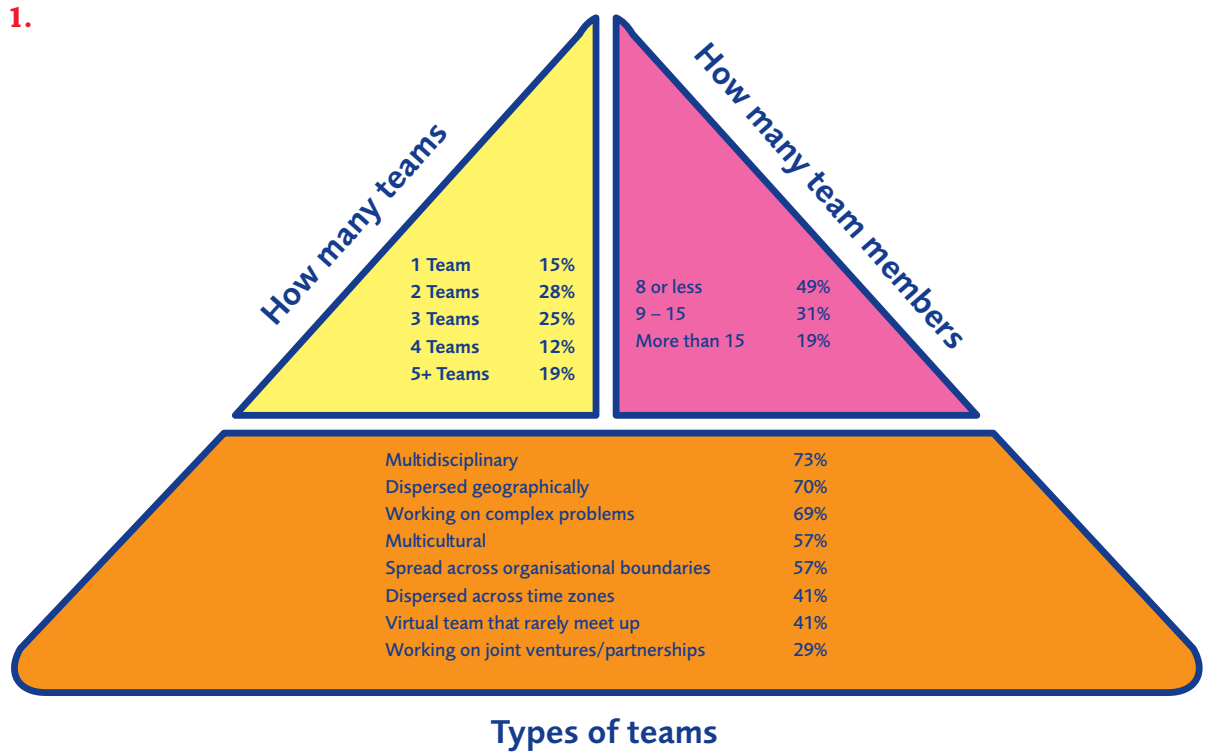
Research approach

The research focused on the following areas:

- The environment in which teams operate
- The challenges facing team leaders and their teams
- The way teams are communicating – what works and what needs to change
- The skills and competencies required to lead in a complex environment
- The role of organisational support in helping teams to succeed
- The future – how organisations, leaders and teams will need to respond to the changing environment.

We combined quantitative research with indepth interviews and case study research. Over 300 responses were received from a questionnaire designed for people working in complex teams. In addition we conducted 20 indepth interviews with team leaders at senior levels who were working with complex teams. Some teams operate at a single site or in two or more countries, others were international. The group were selected from various sectors including financial, hi-tech, public sector, consultancy, pharma, and media. We were able to identify high performance teams and leaders, and from this explore areas of best practice in terms of leadership, team development and organisational support.

Figure 1.



The challenges

The key challenges faced by managers working in a complex team environment were identified as follows:

Key challenges	% of all respondents
Conflicting priorities	69%
Lack of time to meet as a team	52%
Lack of resources	50%
Changing goalposts	47%

“Each manager has different expectations of each member of the team. However, there does not seem to be a standard which often makes it difficult to ensure that the requirements of each manager are met.”

“I have team members in London and the USA. This leads directly into my other major challenge which is inability to meet as a team and time zone difference. We have no opportunity to work ‘together’ as a team, share experiences, discuss any problems unless it is on the phone, which is clearly not as effective as being in person.”

“The work of the team is dynamic, priorities are continuously shifting. This creates difficulties in terms of keeping people focused and aware of the changes. It’s not always easy to explain why things are changing. Some people cope better than others in this environment.”

These quotes illustrate just of a few of the challenges felt by both team members and their leaders.

The confusion, insecurity, resultant tension and conflict caused by these challenges are often shouldered by the team leader. Responses to the questions:

- What else could your team leader do to help you and your team to be more effective?
- Describe any specific leadership skills, competencies and attributes particularly suited to leading complex teams effectively.

revealed an amazing array of comments indicating that team members often want their leaders to be literally everything to everyone and all the time.

The tensions

We have reflected some of these issues in **Figure 2** below depicting typical tensions that leaders of complex teams face 24/7.

1. Face to face and virtual communication

Managing the balance between face to face and virtual communication is a major challenge. Team members who are often isolated want to talk face to face with their team leader, yet in reality this is impossible and results in pressure and intrusions into personal life as the quotes from team leaders illustrate:

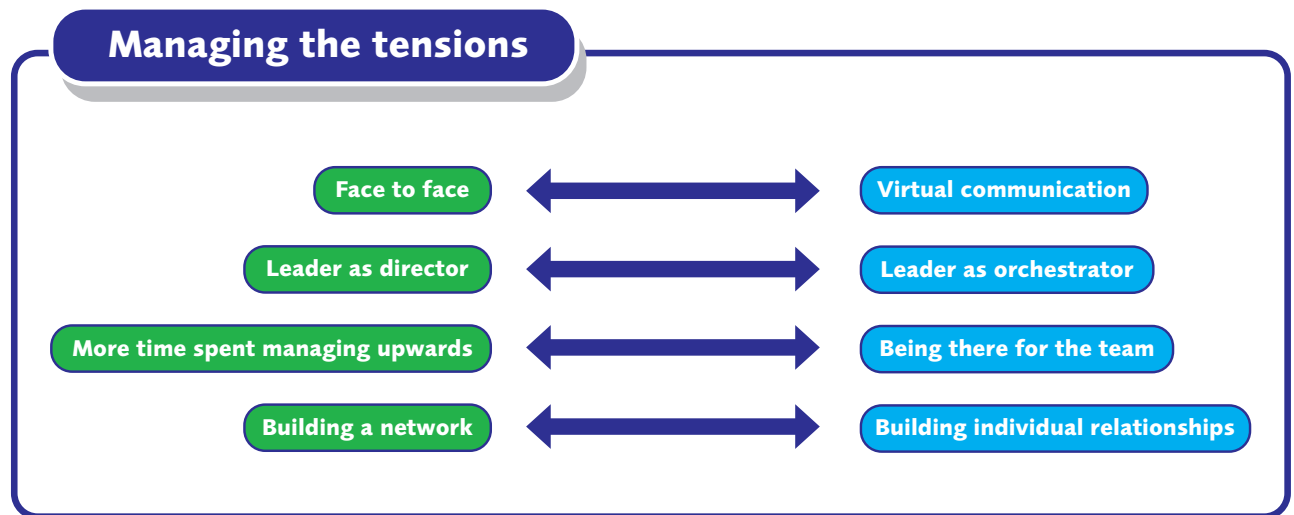
"I take my computer on holiday."

"I am always available on the mobile – I don't switch it off."

"50% of my time is spent travelling to visit the team."

"I often spend the evening catching up with people."

Figure 2.



2. Leader as director and orchestrator

Knowing what to be directive about and when seems to be a balancing act for team leaders. One team leader whose team is spread across China, India and the USA illustrates this well:

"I have to be clear about what are the important 'non negotiable' issues for the new team leader and what's optional. I will be clear about what I expect of their role with local business and what the results should be."

Being clear about what to be directive about is important, but so too is the ability to take on a role as orchestrator – to know when to stand back and facilitate team success.

Other leaders recognised this as the following quotes illustrate:

"My work is much more now about adding ideas and communicating what we are trying to do."

"With increasing complexity you have to let yourself be upwardly managed by others. You can't have an ego – it's about being led to the right place."

3. More time managing upwards and being there for the team

The leader of a complex team often has to balance the time between their team facing activities and the more political roles of competing for scarce resources, securing sponsorship for the team, protecting the team members, and ensuring that they get the recognition they deserve.

One team leader when talking about some of her biggest challenges in managing a dispersed international team drew attention to managing the organisational issues:

"Each country has its own HR and promotional strategies which means that I have to build links with managers in each country and understand the different systems in order to help my team receive the promotion they deserve."

Understanding the politics, the hierarchy and building personal relationships is the recipe for her success in this area.

This is contrasted by the importance of being there for the team:

"It's important to be there for the team when people need you, and to take time to get to know people and spend time together."

"I always need to be interested. I'll ask people how things are going, pick up on the subtle hints and follow up with people. At least 20% if not more of my time is spent on this type of work."

4. Building a network and building individual relationships

Building a network of relationships throughout the organisation is a key role for a team leader, as is building the network within the team and between teams.

Often the team leader is the only one with the "big picture" and has a greater understanding of how the team can work together and work with other teams.

"I spend 70% of my time communicating."

"My job is complex for a number of reasons, such as the fact that I'm expected to look at issues concerning clinical trials, suppliers, and marketing. Not all of these are within my expertise but I can call on colleagues, and more senior managers, elsewhere in the company. I also can

discuss these issues within my team and we often find that sharing the problem this way means we can find the answer."

Equally important though is the role of building individual relationships with each member of the team in order to build trust and reduce conflict.

"The trust I have built with my team means that they are prepared to let me intervene when it is necessary to resolve issues."

"I work hard at the beginning to find out what motivates people and then tailor my approach accordingly."

The tensions outlined above are not alternatives or choices. They are essential elements for success in complex teams. Yet for many team leaders this is creating excessive pressures on both their work and personal lives. It is certainly not surprising that a recent *Harvard Business Review* article 'Why smart people underperform'⁵ described how this increasing complexity is leading to under performance and poor decision making amongst managers.

Sharing responsibility

The growing complexity of business – at global and local levels – is here to stay and there is little likelihood of returning to the relative simplicity of the early 1990s. Despite the fact that teams have been around for so many years, they remain one of the most difficult areas to get right.

Team leaders cannot shoulder this responsibility alone. Leadership responsibility needs to be shared across the team and throughout the organisation.

Shared leadership

As **Figure 3** overleaf illustrates, team leaders can no longer operate in traditional

ways. Being responsible for all decisions, available all hours and being the central focus for all information is no longer feasible. Many team leaders we interviewed recognised the need to let go and change their role:

"It took me 14 months to be solo and miss a few meetings so that the team would take more responsibility. The process of letting go was a gradual one."

"It doesn't work if you want to be in charge. I acknowledge that I don't control. I can disrupt and nudge things along in the right direction, but I can't control."

"I know I can't do it on my own – I'm just part of the team."

Yet for this to happen the team also has to move on and recognise that they share the responsibility for the overall success.

As one international team leader who had worked to develop her team to this level pointed out:

"Most of the team are self-motivated; most are here because they believe in what they are doing and some feel quite passionately about what we're trying to do. It sometimes helps to allocate leadership of different parts of the project to individual team members, as this gives them recognition among the rest of the team."

"It's important to know that you can rely on your team – no one person can do it. I know the strengths in the team and the matrix of capabilities and I can rely on the interdependencies between the different teams which are so important."

Figure 3.**Sharing responsibility****Sharing responsibility with the organisation**

Some of the leaders in our research had developed their teams to the stage where shared responsibility was evident, yet this has not been without considerable effort.

We found that the evidence of support from organisations is equally important. When we separated the best performing

teams from our general sample we found that that an overwhelming majority – almost nine out of ten of our high performing teams – received team related training. By contrast only six out of ten of those in our general sample say this is available. Given the need to develop the whole team, team development seems to be an important ingredient in the recipe for success.

In addition to this our successful teams seem to have developed creative ways of measuring and managing performance which focus on key outputs, with measurement systems adapted to reflect the pace and complexity of the work.

Technological support was also more evident, with our excellent teams making greater use of a wider range of communication tools for a whole range of issues, such as performance reviews, problem solving and dealing with interpersonal issues.

In conclusion

The problems and pressures created by business and team complexity are here to stay, and if not recognised and well-managed, will undoubtedly impact on personal and organisational performance. There are many insights in our research that can be useful for team members and leaders, HR directors and chief executives. HR for example needs to recognise and support people through the changes that are happening. One requirement is to be close enough to the business to know how effective teams are currently, and what practical approaches and policies are needed to help teams and team leaders, be more effective.

Rather than the approach evident in many companies which might be described as 'What else can we throw at teams to make their life more complicated, more ambiguous and more difficult?' we hope that our findings can help to craft a more strategic and enlightened way of building successful teams for the future. Much of what happens in organisations is life in the fast lane, triggered by short-term issues which provide little time for reflection. But it could be different. Working with complex teams requires time, effort and planning to get it right, but the

impact could be profound. Just imagine how good this new future might be; instead of a 50% failure rate among complex teams, your business could be a place where 99% succeed!

If you would like to discuss this article further or request a copy of the research report *Teams – Succeeding in Complexity*, due for publication in April 2006 (price £40), please contact
pam.jones@ashridge.org.uk or
viki.holton@ashridge.org.uk

References

1. Developed from Kennedy and Ward (2002) *Making Complex Teams Work*, *Innovations – The Ashridge Journal*.
2. Carla Johnson (1999) *Teams at Work*, *HR Magazine*, May 1999.
3. Jones, Holton et al (2002) *People are our Greatest Assets*, Ashridge report.
4. Sue Canney Davidson and Karen Ward (2000) *Leading International Teams*, McGraw Hill.
5. Edward M. Hallowell (2005) *Why Smart People Underperform*, *Harvard Business Review*, January.