



Thoughts from Linda:

*The Wisdom of Teams  
Creating the High-Performance Organization*

Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith  
1993

In the spirit of 'something old and something new,' we selected this classic 1993 book, now almost 30 years old, which has in this time, sold over 500,000 copies and has been translated into 15 different languages. It is still a helpful guide and considered a 'must read' for consultants, team coaches and team members, and leaders of all types. But it is more than a 'primer' in that it reflects the learnings of these field-tested authors and lays out many subtle factors that underlie team success. It deserves a careful read.

Harvard Business School Press originally published the book under the sponsorship of McKinsey as both authors held significant partnership roles in the firm and were each considered to be management 'gurus' in their days there. Jon Katzenbach went on to form a consulting firm under his name, and Douglas Smith continued to write, completing seven books. He also launched a successful speaking career.

Receiving classic educations for the McKinsey track of partnership/leadership, Katzenbach earned a BA at Stanford and an MBA from Harvard. He also served in the Korean War in the US Navy. Smith describes himself as "a historian, math and science teacher, lawyer, executive, innovator, writer and management consultant and thinker." His formal education included a BA from Yale and a JD from Harvard. Both men have the gravitas and experience to certainly add the word wisdom to the book's title.

I used the Webster **New World Dictionary**, published in 1951, to look up the definition of that word, as that just seemed like a good idea with a book this old, plus the book itself smells like a yummy old library! It is a book that has been in our family for a long time. The word: *wisdom* sits there between *Wisconsinite* (a native or inhabitant of Wisconsin) and *wisecre* (a person who thinks he knows everything.) The definition of *wisdom* offered there is "having or showing good judgment; sagacious; prudent;

discreet" and it indicates that the word's origins are from the Middle East base of *weird*, meaning to see or know.

Both men, who were top echelon management consultants in the '90s, had tremendous experience working with major Fortune-500 firms in corporate America with global reach. What they had seen and known allowed them to bring a strong dose of wisdom to the knowledge base around this most difficult and often complex structural tool for any organization—the team. Their early experiences and good judgment helped many corporate leaders avoid mistakes and achieve good degrees of success based on the advice given by the authors in their consulting practice, which they ultimately translated into this book.

The book is organized into three sections: *Understanding Teams*, *Becoming a Team* and *Exploiting the Potential*. It includes 12 chapters, each section including key lessons and corporate stories, albeit from the 1990s. The stories carry great relevance and are interesting, regardless of their historical timing. Organizations mentioned include, among others: GE, Burlington Northern, *The Tallahassee Democrat*, Deloitte (in its early days before mergers,) and the advertising firm Scintil & Cleve.

What makes this such a classic work is that the basics they describe remain today as issues all teams must tackle. They often mention the "common sense" required to conceive of the need for teams and the approach to the discipline necessary to develop the team into one that is high performing. In my own experience, working with dozens of teams through my own career, I experience teams that indeed have all the required structure and bona fides on paper but fail or sub-optimize because they do not have the requisite discipline to adhere to their own rules or agreements on their practices. The authors call for a commitment to a high-performance culture that offers great opportunities to leverage the power of high-performing teams.

They lay out a familiar version of the 'performance curve' for teams and offer eight best practices to help teams take risks necessary to move up the curve:

1. Establish urgency and direction.
2. Select members based on skills and skill potential, not personalities.
3. Pay particular attention to first meetings and actions.
4. Set clear rules of behavior.
5. Set and seize upon a few immediate performance-oriented tasks and goals.
6. Challenge the group regularly with fresh facts and information.
7. Spend lots of time together.
8. Exploit the power of positive feedback, recognition, and reward.

Another strength of this book is the treatment of 'teams at the top,' which were much rarer in the '90s than today, although these forms are still fairly unique in American business. Chapter 11 deals with *Teams at the Top* and distinguishes between teams and working groups, especially as that structure pertains to executives. Additionally, they deal with the barriers in a sub-section called: *Why Teams are Tougher to Form at the Top* where they offer five "popular but misguided" beliefs about how executives are expected to act in their roles that explain, in part, the reluctance of senior leaders to use this vehicle for driving high-performance.

I find this treatment quite relevant today as it was 30 years ago, as many of the obvious and not-so-obvious conditions still exist.

Whatever you do, do not miss the Epilogue section on *The Killer Bees*—about the boy's high school basketball team from Bridgehampton, New York. As of the writing of this book, the team had amassed an amazing record and had shown themselves to be a strong example of an incredible high-performing sports team.

Recently, Shaquille O'Neal produced a film called *The Killer Bees* about this team in its current iteration. In addition to being interesting to watch, it was selected for several significant recognitions, including at the 2017 Hamptons International Film Festival and the Santa Barbara International Film Festival. It was awarded the 2018 prize for Best Documentary at the YES Film Festival.

It was selected by *Sports Illustrated* as their Best Sports Documentary in 2017 and was also an NYT's critic's selection. You can find it on various streaming channels today, illustrating the team's reputation and legacy and dealing with many societal factors existing today.

I believe there is always good wisdom in returning to the basics. The book, *The Wisdom of Teams*, still has value and is a fairly quick read. I encourage you to take a good look at it in your library as it will remind you of the basics, those tried-and-true elements of teams capable of delivering high-performance to our organizations.