

Introduction

The first idea for this book came from a discussion during a redeye flight back to Italy from a conference in Canada. The people sitting next to us still complain about the moment we pulled out pen and paper and started drawing up charts and diagrams in the middle of the night. This book was born out of a strong belief that coping with the dynamic nature of today's environment is only possible by sharing ideas, by collaborating, and by effectively integrating individual skills. And the pandemic has made this challenge even more complex. The importance of collaboration and teams is particularly clear from statistics that indicate a continued increase in team-based working methods in organizations. Consider that in 1985, the majority of activities (about 70 percent) were performed individually, whereas now the proportion has reversed: about 80 percent of activities and projects within organizations are performed in a team.

While the team has become a cornerstone of organizational life, it now faces complex challenges given the physical distance between people. Hybrid working models were already around before 2020, but the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has affected how people interact within the organization. Suffice to say that a recent survey highlighted that 65 percent of people will work in hybrid or remote models in the coming years.

Just imagine this situation, which we have personally witnessed (surely you've experienced something similar):

Laura oversees two teams, and until a few months ago she was very proud of both of them and her ability to manage them simultaneously. In fact, in a short time, she was able to put them together from scratch and make

them very productive. After Covid-19, the company decided to move to new, more flexible working methods that it had used during the pandemic. At that point, the first problems arose in both teams, in two different ways. *Team 1:* The first team found a new balance with the configuration of the new work model. But Laura thinks this new balance could threaten long-term productivity. In fact, the team now has a very solid core of 60 percent of members who behave and feel like a team. They are very cohesive, productive, and motivated, and team spirit is very high. Apparently there are no problems: the team keeps its commitments on time and meets high quality standards. However, the remaining 40 percent of members are isolated; they believe their contributions are not taken into account, and they don't feel involved in team activities. The core members become more cohesive each day, while the rest of the team is more isolated.

Team 2: The second team seems to have reacted very differently. In fact, there are no isolated members; the group is divided into two subgroups. Each subgroup is very cohesive and works as a team. Within each group, members actively collaborate, trust each other, and have the same way of interpreting challenges. But between the two subgroups there is not the same trust or team spirit, and the tension between them is palpable: they almost always seem to have opposite ways of approaching a problem.

What kind of management problem is Laura facing? How might we help her resolve this critical situation?

This book was born from the experience we gained during training activities and research projects aimed at supporting managers and organizations in situations similar to the one experienced by Laura. In particular, the book unfolds as a series of reflections that emerge in light of the research project *Leading Teams*¹ that we developed with SDA Bocconi School of Management. The project is based on constant interaction between academia and business, with the aim of proposing continuous monitoring of elements that support teams in carrying out their tasks and achieving their goals. We believe, in fact, that the key to managing successful teams lies in a holistic approach that combines the world of research with successful business practices. This approach is able to trigger a process of conscious learning, also thanks to the critical analysis of organizational failures.

As in the first two editions, the book is intended primarily as a practical tool to support those involved in a team as members or as leaders, trying to highlight critical behaviors and related countermeasures that

can facilitate the achievement of team goals. The structure of the book is consistent with this perspective. For this reason, it follows a problem-based approach, so that each chapter represents a moment of reflection and support with regard a specific problem that team members are facing. In particular, from our experience with research and our constant collaboration with companies, we have identified the main questions that managers ask themselves on the subject of team management, and around each question we have built a chapter with the intention of supporting teams in achieving their goals. In addition, we have included an interview in each chapter, to bring in the perspective of the corporate world, with suggestions and insights that are useful for concrete application of the concepts we present. Finally, to stimulate reflection on the various themes, each chapter contains a list of five or six questions that we invite our readers to ask themselves, as well as their team members or leaders, with the aim of fostering constructive contemplation to improve teamwork.

We would like to take the opportunity of this new edition to thank all the readers and participants of the SDA Bocconi School of Management courses who encouraged us to enrich the content of the first two editions. In light of the valuable suggestions and discussions we had in the classrooms and via email, we decided to consider two additional challenges that team leaders face: negotiation processes and managing conflicting objectives within the team, and managing geographically dispersed teams. In sum, the book seeks to answer the following questions:

- Chapter 1: *Creating a team*. Do I really need a team? What kind of team do I need?
- Chapter 2: *Structuring a team*. Which people need to be involved? Does everyone contribute to the team? Who does what?
- Chapter 3: *Decision making in the team*. How can I make decisions more effective?
- Chapter 4: *Managing conflict in the team*. How can I leverage differences between members?
- Chapter 5: *Negotiating among team members*. How can divergent goals be aligned among team members?
- Chapter 6: *Managing geographically dispersed teams*. How can I foster team spirit and collaboration when members are in different locations?

We hope that the questions we have posed represent the ones that leaders or team members ask themselves every day (at least in part). If so, we hope you all enjoy the book and we invite you to help us to continuously develop our Leading Teams project by contributing with suggestions, and by telling us your success (or failure) stories.

Notes

¹ The Leading Teams website (<http://www.sdabocconi.it/leadingteams>), in addition to presenting in detail the research projects we are conducting, also contains practical self-assessment tools, templates, and checklists to complement the guidance and suggestions found in the book.