

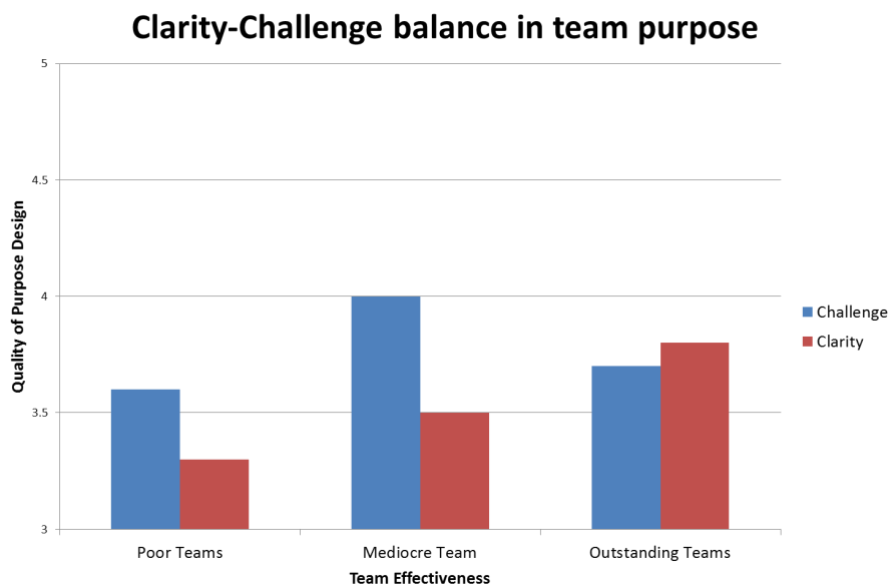
What Makes A Team Purpose Good?

Let's assume for the moment that you want a decision-making team. Just what decisions will they make? What defines the domain of what your team will accomplish together? To get it right, the team's purpose must be clear to all. According to Richard Hackman, who was Professor of social and organizational psychology at Harvard and a global authority on group and team effectiveness, the purpose has to be consequential, challenging and clear.

Teams across organisations often suffer from a lack of consequentiality in their purposes. For such teams, their work has been inadequately connected by organisational leaders to the larger, meaningful purposes, to the work of others, or to the organisation as a whole. This is not the case normally for senior leadership teams, who really understand that what they do as a team is highly consequential for both the short term and longer term for the organisation!

Challenging to the right degree is a tough one. There is a balance needed between autonomy to operate and some rein on the whole thing. Ruth Wageman's research into leadership teams has shown two intriguing patterns:

- First, leaders tend to overchallenge individual members of a team, but underchallenge the team as a whole. In some cases, the teams are restricted to trivia. Some of this is about creating a sense of competitiveness amongst team members, to outperform one another. Some of this is about ensuring that the leader doesn't get challenged. A challenging team can be a threat to an insecure leader. Teams will only feel challenged if the members are asked to exchange strategic information, coordinate organisational initiatives, or make vital decisions on behalf of the organisation.
- Secondly, challenge without clarity hurts performance. The following chart is reproduced from Wageman's 'Senior Leadership Teams' book:



Poor teams are the ones that meet few of their stakeholders' needs and show few signs of becoming stronger over time. Mediocre teams do well by some, but not all, and show modest signs of improvement in their ability to work and learn together. Both types feel more challenged than clear about their work as a team.

The main lesson about the clarity-challenge relationship comes from the outstanding teams - those that serve their stakeholders really well and become better over time. Their purpose is at least as clear as challenging. More clarity is better than less.