

What is the ideal team size?

One of the questions I am frequently asked is “What is the ideal team size?” Well, if I answer from the heart based on my experience of participating in, or observing, many team meetings over the last 50 years or so I am likely to answer “Three. One of whom is sick and the other absent.” The truth is that a great deal of time is wasted on team meetings and we can’t really afford this profligate use of human resources when the pressure is on organisations to achieve more and more from less and less people.

Please don’t misunderstand me. I’m not against people meeting and talking with each other. My concern is about ensuring such discussions lead to a positive outcome rather than creating a sense of frustration by those attending because they feel their time has been wasted.

So, what has this to do with team size? I shall get to this shortly but before considering this question we need to consider one of the main reasons that team meetings are so ineffective and, thus, considered a waste of time. Frequently, it is the lack of clarity about the purpose of the meeting and this factor has a big impact on defining what is the ideal team size. To expand on this let’s consider three common types of team meeting and the implication each has on team size.

1. **Meetings to communicate.** With this type of meeting the purpose is to communicate information to others. The interaction is likely to be little more than seeking clarification to ensure a common understanding. For this type of gathering the numbers can be almost unlimited although there may be practical constraints in terms of the venue capacity. This can partly be addressed by using technology though.
2. **Meetings to negotiate.** As a great deal of interaction is needed with this type of meeting it is important that the number of people involved in the actual face to face discussion is limited. My experience is that an upper number of 8 people should be set, although quite a few more people may be involved in providing the essential information required by the people involved in the negotiation discussions.
3. **Meetings to decide.** These meetings are used for collective consensus decision making and both the number of people involved and the care taken in choosing them is of critical importance. My view is that a limit of no more than 7 people should be involved in this type of meeting. The reason I am not in favour of going beyond this number is because it becomes so difficult and time consuming to arrive at a consensus. With higher numbers it will almost certainly be necessary to adopt voting to arrive at a decision. This is likely to lead to a loss of ownership as those who have been outvoted may feel they have been subverted. Achieving consensus however embraces a spirit of give and take leading to each team member owning the decisions made with the result that each person will strive to achieve the agreed objective with strong advocacy.

Having briefly outlined the three different common types of meeting I feel compelled to share with you an anecdote relating to the lack of clarity about the purpose of meetings. A little experiment I, mischievously, enjoy engaging people in is asking each person attending a meeting to write on a piece of paper, in one sentence, what they believe to be the main purpose of the meeting. Whether it be a board of directors or a department or function team, there is usually a wide variance between the views of the participants, and I am sure many of you reading this will have had similar experiences.

This, I hope, illustrates why it is so difficult to answer in generic terms “What is the ideal team size?” without first asking and answering the question “For what purpose?”. I hope by reading this article you might now be better placed to answer the question yourself and maybe this will lead to less wasted time and reduced levels of frustration.

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