Teams are considered by many to be “the organisations of the future”. Teams, in which a leader is a member and participant, are central to innovative and effective health research. In Africa, teams are particularly important to deal effectively with challenges such as: inequities in health and health research faced by communities and researchers, inadequate financing, weak institutional capacity, and human resource constraints. However, “Africans often prefer to become individual specialists rather than work as a team. Scientists in Africa can often focus on their own success rather than train their successors. Senior researchers frequently regard visionary junior colleagues as too ambitious. These are short-sighted attitudes: being the only success story does not lead to progress.”1 Health research requires teams that are strong and supportive, able to manage the challenges faced in African health research.

**Learning Objectives**

1. To explore the meaning of team work and the different forms it may take.

2. To consider key elements in working in a team for health research in Africa.

Module developed, by the Canadian Coalition for Global Health Research (CCGHR), as part of the “Strengthening leadership capacity to improve the production and use of health knowledge in Africa Pilot Program” supported by the International Development Research Centre’s Governance, Equity and Health Program (GEH). © 2006

KEY MESSAGES

- Leaderships is increasingly seen as a team function - for example, leadership teams

- Considerable knowledge is available, in the form of best practices, about the determinants of effective teamwork;

- Teams that include both researchers and research users are particularly important in health research to ensure that research reflects societal priorities and research results are used in practice and policy;

- Increasingly, available information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide new opportunities to health teams work effectively, even when team members are geographically dispersed.

DEFINING SOME TERMS

Team: A group of individuals with complimentary abilities and skills committed to a common purpose and accountable for performing tasks that contribute to achieving common goals. Collective benefits from working in a team must outweigh the benefits of working individually.

Team Work: The process by which a group of individuals, working as a team, is able to collaborate on a specific project or activity.

Team Synergy: Setting the stage so that the team is able to work as a unit. This can be built through strategic planning sessions as well as social gatherings.
**TOPIC 1: Functions and Roles of Teams**

Teams unite individuals who share a common goal or purpose and have skills that will help to reach this goal. What differentiates a team from a simple grouping of individuals is the accountability within the team for performing tasks related to the purpose and goal.

Four types of teams have been described, based on the function the team is meant to play:

- Problem solving teams: created to address a specific problem; these teams are time bound by the problem they are attempting to understand and manage;
- Self-managed teams: usually ongoing groups within an organization who share a common mission and collectively manage their own affairs;
- Cross-functional teams: multidisciplinary groups consisting of people who bring diverse skills and experience to work on a number of different issues;
- Virtual teams: these are teams whose members live and work in different places, yet still manage to work together, usually electronically, either at the same time or at a different time.

Within a team, members take on different roles and responsibilities. There are approximately nine characteristic roles based on how a person relates to others in the team. These roles include those who are:

- action-oriented (shaper, implementer, completer finisher)
- people-oriented (coordinator, teamworker, resource investigator)
- cerebral (plant, monitor evaluator, specialist)

**Exercise 1**

What type of team are the fellowship teams? Within the team, identify people who exhibit one or more of the nine characteristics presented above? What implications do the different types of people have in the work of your team? What strategies has your team developed to support these different types of people?

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TOPIC 2: What makes a team effective and satisfying?

Effective teams depend highly on the dynamics of the group. Group dynamics are related to the size of the group, tasks and roles of members, group leadership, development of the team, and the norms of the team. Each of these is dependent on the process of team development. There are a number of different theories on how teams effectively and successfully develop. Two of these are:

**Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing**
This four stage model is followed at the end by a period of renewal and reassessment in which team members consider the goals and objectives and re-commit to the work of the team. They become re-energised.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forming (orientation)</th>
<th>Storming (trust building)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team members may be tentative in participation and test the rules of behaviour.</td>
<td>A struggle for control may occur and team members begin to build trust.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Performing (implementing)</th>
<th>Norming (commitment)</th>
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<tr>
<td>The team works together and is able to address and tackle complex problems as well as support on another.</td>
<td>Goals and roles are defined and plans are made. Team members trust each other and share with one another.</td>
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**Creating and Sustaining**
In this seven-step model, teams move through a period in which they are created and evolve into a period in which they are sustained and continue their work. Achieving commitment among team members is central and therefore must occur in both the creating and sustaining stages. Each step may be oriented around a simple question to team members:

**Creating Stages**
1. Orientation: Why am I here?
2. Trust Building: Who are you?
3. Goal and Role definition: What are we doing?
4. Commitment: How will we do it?

**Sustaining Stages**
4. Commitment: How will we do it?
5. Planning: Who does what, when and where?
6. Implementation: the high performance (or "wow!") stage
7. Re-assessment and Renewal: Do we continue? If yes, why and how?

“Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing” is seen as a linear, step-wise process. In contrast, stages within Creating and Sustaining may occur simultaneously. Neither is time bound, as different teams require a different timeframe for achieving commitment and trust.
**EXERCISE 2**

What occurred during each of the stages listed above in your Fellowship Team? What methods did the team use to get through each stage? On reflection now, is there something you would try the next time you build a team?
**TOPIC 3: Knowledge producer-user teams**

There is a recognised challenge globally of ensuring that the available knowledge is actually used to inform decision-making and programming – this has been called the ‘know-do’ gap. Both “producers” of evidence and the “users” of evidence have become increasingly aware of this gap, and the process of how research gets “translated” into policy decisions and program management has itself become an important field of study. Knowledge producer-user teams are a vital mechanism in bridging this gap.

Bridging the know-do gap requires researchers to actively *push* their work and results into policy and practitioner circles. It requires policy makers to actively *pull* and seek out research results for use in their work. And finally, it requires researchers and research-users to build relationships in order to create *linkage and exchange* between these different communities. Increasingly, it has been realised that “producer-user” teams are an important mechanism to promote linkage and exchange, and thus the more effective use of relevant knowledge.

The linkage and exchange strategy is aimed at providing methods and avenues for researchers to engage with research users (policy makers as well as practitioners). The interaction and relationships will ensure that research priorities reflect the primary issues and questions of concern among policy makers and practitioners as well as ensuring research moves to action.

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**EXERCISE 3**

A special feature of this pilot program is the strategy of creating “Leadership Teams” consisting of both researchers (knowledge producers) and research users.

- What advantage do you see with this arrangement?
- What challenges or difficulties have you experienced in trying to make the fellowship teams work effectively?
- What are the most important things that you have learned so far, through participating in these “researcher-user” teams?

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**TOPIC 4: ICTs and effective teamwork**

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) offer a number of special opportunities for teams working across long distances as well as across disciplines. Health researchers and research users face a number of challenges including:

- A diversity of work environments – multiple offices, home office, hotel rooms while traveling, different countries, different time zones.
- Collaborative involvement of groups and individuals widely dispersed geographically.
- A need to have instant access to the most recent information on demand to meet immediate needs.
- Effective multi-tasking of roles and responsibilities across a number of different projects and commitments.

ICTs have the capacity to help create a common work environment across these different settings. One example of the role of ICTs is the ‘digital workspace’ – in which an electronic, internet based space is created for document storage, discussion, joint work as well as individual work. Digital technology facilitates information sharing, supports planning and organising work, as well as enables collaborative work.

Technology is not a panacea, or simple solution. In order to be effective, team members must commit to active involvement in using the technology, in practising and getting comfortable with the software so that it becomes an easy part of their work life. This involves a change in work behaviour and must be supported by the team as a whole. In addition, the technology must be appropriate to the setting and team. Internet access, sustainability and availability of technology must be considered.

### Lead by Doing: Team Champions for ICTs

“Team members can become frustrated when there are different levels of comfort or enthusiasm for using the technology amongst the team thus leading to duplication of effort, or when they experience local difficulties in accessing the Internet. Strong organizational commitment and team “champions” for the use of the technology are needed. Champions for new technology must “lead by doing.” They need to demonstrate to team members and at the unit or organizational level how the technology makes a difference in the work.”

*LAMP Module: Team and Coalition Building*

### Connectivity Africa

A programme to improve access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Africa that is implemented by IDRC in partnership with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. The initiative supports research, development and innovative uses of ICT applications for African development. Priority sectors include education and health. A number of projects are facilitating improved connectivity and capacity among researchers and universities to use ICTs in sharing knowledge and connecting with partners. Visit: [http://www.connectivityafrica.ca/](http://www.connectivityafrica.ca/)

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ILLUSTRATIVE STORY FROM AFRICA

A health research “producer-user” team in Uganda

When the African Health Research Fellowship pilot program was first designed, in 2003, the “know-do gap” between producers and users of research was beginning to be recognized. It was therefore decided to “experiment” with the idea that health research leadership and management skills could be more effectively developed by working with teams, and not only with individual fellows. In particular, it was hypothesized that these teams could learn how to narrow the “know-do gap” if team members themselves represented both knowledge users and producers. Thus the call for applications within the countries participating in the pilot project specifically requested applications from teams of four individuals, two of which were researchers (preferably from different disciplines) and two individuals who represented “knowledge users”.

Uganda “Team A” consists of four persons, including:
- a biomedical researcher, working in a Virus Research Institute;
- a public health researcher, working on a special project within the Ministry of Health and holding a cross-appointment in the Makerere University’s Institute of Public Health;
- a health planner in the Ministry of Health; and
- the national coordinator of an non-government organization: the Uganda National Health Users/Consumers Organization.

At a recent workshop⁴, this team reviewed its work to date and on its own experience as a team. The team was assembled in 2004 in order to apply for participation in the program. Since it began its work in 2005, the team has met almost every week—and at least monthly with its mentor. It has an ambitious and well-defined work plan (using the “Outcome Mapping” framework). When asked why they believed that their team was working effectively, team members listed the following features:

- Composition: the intentional way in which the team was assembled, following the guidelines recommended by the program;
- Compatibility: several members had worked together previously, on other projects and activities, and therefore respected and trusted each other;
- Complimentarity: the combination of different backgrounds, experience and skills facilitated the achievement of the plans of the team, and the learning objectives—both of individual members and of the team overall;
- Consistency: having an agreed upon regular meeting time, and sticking with this plan, allowed the team to make progress and work consistently;
- Commitment: each member was determined to fulfill the commitments made to each other.

⁴ Uganda teams workshop, Kampala, 23 June 2006
ANNOTATED READINGS


- This book summarizes a study of inter-agency collaboration in the American public sector, based on nineteen case studies of "interagency collaborative capacity".

TOOLS AND RESOURCES


- This module, part of a series on Leadership and Management in international research, focuses on the importance of team building and coalition building. The module discusses how people and organizations work together – and can learn to do so more effectively.


- This website has four workshops for communicating and working in teams. The workshop topics include: Work Teams, Communicating, Problem Solving and Effective Teams. The workshops include short exercises.
What did you think of the module?

Evaluation and Feedback

Please send us your comments on this module as well as suggestions and ideas.

Comments can be sent to:

- Mutuma Mugambi (AfHRF co-director): mugambi@africaonline.co.ke
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