



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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### **Self-Managed Teams are Still Relevant in Today's Agile Organizations**

Teamwork is used to complete most of the work in an organization. When people work on a team, they can become more motivated and enthusiastic, develop new ideas to improve group performance, and assume greater responsibility in putting these plans into action.

Self-managed teams are a specific type of team that maintains a high degree of collaboration and manages itself, with the goal of becoming a very high-performing team. In self-managed teams, trust grows among the team members as work progresses, and they become motivated to accept more difficult challenges. The focus in these types of groups is on performance, as well as on teamwork. Their success requires strong personal and company commitment, skills development, and support from team members and management.

#### **Preparation**

All self-managed teams need training to prepare them to work in this new paradigm. A very common mistake is to throw people into a self managed environment without adequate preparation. This results in chaos, frustration and paralysis. The best time to offer training is when the team is initially being formed, and then on an ongoing basis when the team encounters situations it cannot handle.

Of course, the team cannot be trained in every possible contingency. One of the objectives of a self-managed team is that they be flexible enough to resolve unforeseen problems when they occur. No amount of training and planning can bring perfect results. Unforeseen problems will certainly arise, and the team must be prepared to invest adequate resources and energy to work through all impediments.

#### **Coaches replace supervisors**

When companies implement self-managed teams, they shift their focus from the concept of 'supervisors' to 'coaches.' While a supervisor's role is to make decisions and instruct team members in how to tackle any situation, the role of a coach is to guide team members and help them improve their decision-making skills through experience. Thus, the skills expected of coaches are quite different from those of supervisors. Their responsibilities shift from getting work done to developing the capabilities of team members. This is done by encouraging discussions, asking questions and providing explanations to raise the team's level of thinking.

#### **Where are self managed teams today?**

There is not much mention of self-managed teams in literature today, even though it was a big topic ten years ago. However, perhaps it is mostly the name that is absent. There is quite a bit of literature about teams with many of these same characteristics. However, they are called Agile teams. These are mostly IT software development teams that follow Agile, "light" and/or "Extreme" development concepts.



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Agile teams were initially defined in the twelve principles of the Agile Alliance ([www.agilealliance.com](http://www.agilealliance.com)). Three of the original twelve basic principles of the Agile Alliance describe these types of teams, as follows.

- Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.
- The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams.
- At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.

These three principles (along with similar concepts from Extreme Programming, Scrum and other light methodologies) have set the stage for a varied discussion that has expanded and extended the concepts of the self-organizing “Agile” teams.

### Summary

The name “self managed team” may not be as popular today, but the concept is still a good one. Often, these teams are more productive than other teams. In fact, many self-managed team members state that weekly meetings and ongoing interaction keeps them going during some very difficult times.

This model has been further promoted as the basis for many of the light development methodologies you read about today. Self-managed teams do not necessarily arise by accident. You need to invest training and coaching into helping these types of teams reach their high performance states. However, once they gain traction, self-managed teams are a wonder to observe and can become much more productive than the sum of all the individual members.