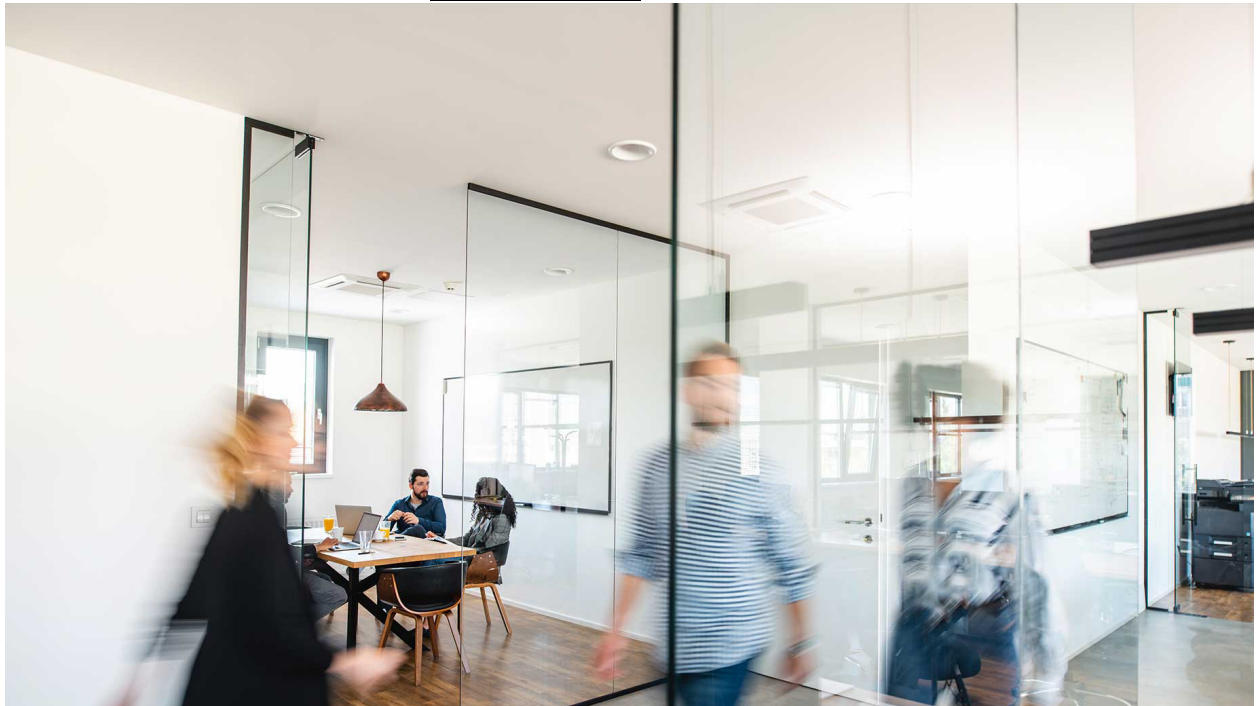https://www.gallup.com/workplace/354935/teams-bosses-overcoming-matrix-madness.aspx?version=print

OCTOBER 19, 2021

Too Many Teams, Too Many Bosses: Overcoming Matrix Madness

BY ROBERT SUTTON AND **BEN WIGERT**

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Working on multiple teams creates unique collaboration challenges
- Cognitive overload, role conflict and coordination issues plague matrixed teams
- Unlock cross-functional collaboration with nine best practices

Teamwork is the lifeblood of every organization. Each day, work is divided up and orchestrated to achieve local and systemwide goals. How people and tasks come together is the art and science of teamwork.

When leaders aspire to improve their organization's responsiveness to market demands, adapt to change and enhance their operational efficiencies, they often look to how their teams are structured and collaborating. One popular strategy for enhancing collaboration and agility is to create a "matrixed" organization where employees work on multiple teams and report to multiple managers.

Prior to the pandemic, in a 2019 nationally representative study of over 14,000 U.S. employees,[1] Gallup found that 72% of employees were working on matrixed teams before the pandemic -- ranging from "slightly matrixed" employees who occasionally work on multiple teams to "highly matrixed" employees who work on multiple teams every day and have teammates who report to different managers.

Three types of matrixed work:

1. **Slightly matrixed:** Employees who *sometimes* work on multiple teams with people who *may or may not report to the same manager*
2. **Manager-matrixed:** Employees who work on multiple teams *every day* with different people, but most team members *report to the same manager*
3. **Highly matrixed:** Employees who work on multiple teams *every day* with different people who *report to different managers*

When matrixed teams work well, it enhances collaboration, communication, creativity and resource-sharing across the organization. Gallup data also show that highly matrixed workers tend to feel more connected to their teammates and more appreciated for their contributions.[2]

And yet, matrixed teams can go horribly wrong.

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On average, matrixed workers spend more time in meetings and less time thinking about and doing their own work. One-third of highly matrixed workers say they spend most of their day in internal meetings. In contrast, only 2% of non-matrixed employees and 12% of slightly matrixed employees say their day is bogged down with internal meetings.[3]

Many matrixed employees feel overwhelmed by the onslaught of messages, questions, information requests and meetings with bosses, peers, subordinates and customers. A staggering 45% of highly matrixed workers say they spend most of their day responding to requests from coworkers.[4]

Rob Cross, professor of global leadership at Babson College, refers to this kind of chaotic work experience as "collaborative overload."[5] Cross' research shows that, in many teams and organizations, the most beleaguered people carry a much larger share of the collaboration burden than their colleagues do.[6] Their names seem to be plastered to every email and meeting invite.

Collaborative overload leaves them with little time to do their own work, physically exhausted, emotionally burned out and prone to quitting. A five-minute bathroom break between meetings is a gift -- forget about lunch away from the keyboard.

The Challenges of Matrixed Work

When matrixed teams get it wrong, they can become a collaboration nightmare for their captives.

Overburdened matrixed teams pose a risk to their members' performance and wellbeing. Often, the root cause(s) of these problems can be traced back to three obstacles:

- cognitive overload
- role conflict and role ambiguity
- coordination problems

Cognitive Overload

Cognitive load is the mental effort that a task requires. Workers in highly matrixed organizations wrestle with greater cognitive load because they have more demands to balance -- more bosses, more colleagues on different teams, and sometimes more customers and suppliers.[7] And the rise of the global workplace means that more employees work across multiple time zones, which can feel like a never-ending workday.

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Employees who work in matrixed organizations often work on larger teams because so many decision-makers and implementers are involved in every project.[8,9] This adds even more attention-draining cognitive load to their efforts. Larger teams tend to be more difficult to lead and more frustrating to work on because members devote more time to organizing their work and less time to actually doing it.

Consider the simple act of taking turns in team conversations. The more people in a meeting, the more people who can -- and often will -- offer opinions, advice and questions. That slows everything down, no matter how "agile" an organization may claim to be. Misunderstandings and conflict flare because, as teams get larger, it becomes harder and harder for each member -- including leaders -- to track and respond to the needs of every other member.

Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity

Role *conflict* occurs when employees face contradictory, competing or incompatible expectations. Role *ambiguity* happens when people have unclear expectations about what work to do, how to do it and whom to do it with.

Matrixed teams often become laden with clashing and unclear expectations from multiple bosses or teammates, shifting and vague directions about which decisions people do (and do not) have the authority to make, and demands from customers that are impossible to satisfy without displeasing bosses or

peers. When employees are working across teams for multiple managers, role conflict and role ambiguity are especially rampant.

Gallup's 2019 study confirms that **highly matrixed employees are less likely than employees on traditional teams to strongly agree that they know what is expected of them at work**.[10] Each individual manager may articulate expectations for what an employee needs to get done. And when those expectations conflict with other expectations, or when expectations are not clearly understood, it creates confusion for employees. Worse yet, role conflict and role ambiguity are often invisible to managers in different silos.

To better understand the causes of role conflict and role ambiguity, and other impediments, Gallup researchers routinely conduct "listening tours" of executives that examine their biggest barriers to performance. One of the most consistent and vexing challenges across these studies is **managing competing priorities** within and across business units.

Competing priorities arise when organizations reward managers for leading successful projects but don't celebrate them for supporting other projects ahead of their own. And when managers give their all to a project, they can become convinced that nothing else is as important and insist that colleagues move their personal darlings to the top of the list.

Gallup's listening tours have also revealed that in many matrixed organizations, a different -- nearly opposite -- malady arises where important initiatives and solutions fall through the cracks. Everyone agrees that certain projects are important, but no single boss or team takes full responsibility for leading the effort. As a result, many good ideas become the "walking dead" or "orphan problems" -- solutions or initiatives that everyone likes, but nobody is nurturing.

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impossible to satisfy without displeasing bosses or peers.

Role conflict and role ambiguity also happen when leaders don't know how to prioritize and clarify expectations. Their intentions to do what is best for the business are good, but often lack decision-making processes, goals and metrics that help them link individual and team goals to what is best for the organization. As a result, people are confused, or don't even consider, "what matters most" and "what success looks like" for the greater good. And, at the same time, they understand, are rewarded for and focus on concrete team and personal priorities.

One executive we interviewed lamented that her sales team should be benefiting from a new customer relationship management platform the company purchased. But when configuring the new system, her colleagues could not agree on which metrics, information and functionalities were most important to include. Everyone wanted it to serve their personal interests.

Nobody agreed on their shared priorities or who was responsible for keeping customer information up to date.

Coordination Problems

Coordination problems arise when people and teams need to weave their work together and help each other succeed, but fail to cohesively orchestrate their efforts. Instead, they think and act as if they don't need to consider handoffs, bottlenecks, and the impact of their decisions on other people and teams.

Research by Chip Heath, professor emeritus at Stanford Graduate School of Business, and the late Nancy Staudenmayer, former assistant professor at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, found that such "coordination neglect" is fueled by a pair of intertwined cognitive biases.[11]

The first bias, which they deem "partition focus," happens when leaders devote most or all of their attention to dividing up the work. For instance, leaders may focus on building the best teams, functions and specialized units but "neglect" how to cohesively integrate their work.

Heath and Staudenmayer call the second bias "component focus," which happens when people fixate on the work done by their particular team or function and ignore how it shapes or ought to be integrated with the efforts of "outsiders." When organizations are plagued by partition and component focus biases, collaboration problems abound, conflict rages and teams become silos where members can't understand why "they" don't get "us."

Matrixed teams were designed to reduce coordination neglect problems. The idea behind having multiple bosses and being a member of multiple interdisciplinary teams was to help employees learn to better collaborate across functions and achieve shared goals.

Unfortunately, in too many matrixed teams, people who identify strongly with a particular silo go through the motions of attending interdisciplinary team meetings while remaining focused on their "component." Or, worse yet, they treat interactions with "outsiders" as battles where their goal is to impose their will on others rather than to collaborate and support them.

The Remote Work Twist

The final chapter of our "Great Global Work-From-Home Experiment" has yet to be written. But more than a year and a half into the pandemic, two things are clear:

1. how we collaborate has changed, and
2. the teams we meet with are exhausted

Remote workers in particular are burdened, worn out and just plain <u>burned out</u>.

For highly matrixed teams, this adds another layer of complexity to an already complicated work experience.

In a remote or hybrid work environment, it's easier for a remote worker to be forgotten or feel neglected when they're not "in the room" with their teammates. It's also more difficult to have impromptu conversations that help people get on the same page or brainstorm new ideas.

Interpersonal communication and collaboration are more difficult in these environments, even when well-orchestrated. In her book *Remote Work Revolution: Succeeding from Anywhere*, Professor Tsedal Neeley of Harvard Business School describes the many nonverbal cues that are lost in remote

work.[12] Subtle changes in tone, emotional moods, even passive-aggressive behavior -- all this is lost, or at least muted, for remote workers.

When collaborating remotely, everything must be made more explicit. Everything must be reiterated and well-documented. As a result, the opportunities for role conflict and coordination problems are high. These demands explain why Gallup finds that remote work is especially difficult for workers who depend on others to finish their tasks -- a common requirement of matrixed teams.[13] Highly interdependent work simply requires more handoffs, feedback and communication, thus increasing the cognitive load and misunderstandings experienced by employees.

Jobs that depend heavily on close personal relationships can be especially difficult to do remotely. Gallup's analysis of over 550 jobs across 20 industries found that administrative assistants have lower engagement and higher burnout when they work remotely. That makes sense because the work that administrative assistants do requires supporting interdependent work and understanding and anticipating the needs, moods and quirks of colleagues and customers -- who are often in a hodgepodge of widely dispersed teams, time zones, silos and organizations. Compared with face-to-face interactions, working remotely makes it more difficult to detect and navigate social cues, coordinate constantly changing schedules, and quickly repair misunderstandings. And the (often more powerful) people that administrative assistants support may fail to make the effort to assure their needs and preferences are communicated clearly and explicitly, even though that is so crucial to doing remote work well.

Making the Matrix Work Better

Matrixed teams don't have to be a collaboration nightmare. They can be highly energizing and rewarding when they work. We recommend the following evidence-based practices to unlock the power of exceptional teamwork for your matrixed teams:

- **Relaunch your team.** When rethinking how to make your matrixed teams work, consider that it may be time for what Neeley calls a "team relaunch" -- to unite around clear expectations, eliminate role conflict, and decrease social and cognitive load.

  Neeley finds that the best team leaders routinely ask their members to pause and "pull over," to consider how their goals ought to change, how they ought to work together differently and what resources they need.

She advises that teams should "relaunch" or "refresh" routinely -- at least a few times a year, and more often during times of change.

Given all of the changes occurring in work and life these days, it's a good time for every team to do a relaunch. To update and recommit to shared goals and norms. To reconsider who ought to do what. And to reassess how the team uses its money and time.

A tip: If the people on your team are so busy, and so exhausted, that finding the 90 minutes or so required to do a relaunch seems difficult or impossible, that is a sign that you especially need one right now!

- **Who's the boss? Matrixed teams work best when you know who the boss is.** Apple uses the term "DRI," or directly responsible individual. That's the person who is personally responsible for the success of a project -- a single point of contact for all coordination efforts, who gets the credit when things go right and the blame when things go wrong. Having a clear "coordinator-in-chief" role for a project helps resolve role conflict and improves outcomes.

  Gallup's data support this approach: It can be difficult to serve multiple bosses.[14] Manager-matrixed employees (those who work on multiple teams every day with different people, but most team members report to the same manager) tend to have significantly higher engagement than do highly matrixed employees (those who work on multiple teams every day with different people who report to different managers). If there are two bosses, make clear who is responsible for making final decisions on key topics and who is accountable for success.

Employees who strongly agree their manager continually clarifies their work priorities are 3.8 times as likely to be engaged and 53% less likely to feel burned out at work (very often or always).[15]

- **Improve communication and collaboration between leaders.** When employees have multiple bosses in multiple silos, those bosses need to talk to each other *constantly* to clarify expectations and priorities.

  Leaders are busy and sensitive to adding one more meeting to their calendar, but when it comes to breaking down silos, there is no substitute for leaders co-creating a clear vision that aligns their teams. Cross-functional collaboration is very difficult to coordinate, and handoffs often fail without disciplined communication and collaboration between leaders.

  Sometimes, a larger collaboration load for leaders is necessary to reduce collaboration overload for the rest of the team.

  Partnership between managers and project leaders must result in employees having a unified understanding of their roles, responsibilities and priorities. Managers and project leaders must create accountability for team members making progress toward their shared goals.

  According to matrixed employees, the three most important factors in helping them prioritize their work are:

  1. Clear expectations from my manager
  2. Clear direction from project leaders
  3. Communication between my manager and my project leaders

  Unfortunately, only 14% of matrixed employees say their project leaders always provide feedback to their manager about their performance.[16]

- **Play the subtraction game.** Associate Professor Leidy Klotz of the University of Virginia argues that we humans are wired to solve problems by adding rather than reducing complexity. In a study published by *Nature*, Klotz describes a new university president who

asked students, staff and faculty for suggestions for improving the university -- only 11% of the responses were subtractive.[17]

The best leaders actively fight "addition sickness." They keep asking: What's essential? What can be eliminated? If you have too many people in a meeting, can you shrink the team assigned to the project? Do you really need to meet every week? Can you cut hour-long meetings to 30 minutes?

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Sometimes, now-obsolete matrices were created out of a need for cross-team collaboration that is no longer relevant and can be handled through subcommittees, small team sprints, or just an occasional email or Slack update.

- **Eliminate unnecessary collaboration and coordination.** Take a look at role responsibilities and work partnerships. Design work processes so that people can complete more of their work without needing to wait on others. These asynchronous work processes can create flexibility and efficiency for everyone when tasks can be completed on each individual's own timetable and communication is not expected to be immediate.

  Increased independence empowers individuals and frees teams from bottlenecks, as long as desired performance outcomes and deadlines are clear to everyone.

  Asynchronous collaboration can be particularly helpful in a remote or hybrid work environment in which people work independently from home, instead of being tied to a "working together in the same room is always best" culture.

- **Experiment with perspective-taking to improve teamwork.** Even when people from different teams are brought together on the same team, their thinking is still often stuck in the silo they came from and it's tough for them to see the constraints of other roles.

When this happens, you can quickly improve teamwork through a simple but challenging exercise called "perspective-taking." Ben Horowitz, a venture capitalist and former CEO of Opsware, recounts a perspective-taking exercise he used to solve a pesky cross-functional collaboration problem hindering his business.

He compared his technique to the movie "Freaky Friday," in which a mother and daughter who are completely frustrated with each other get their wish of changing places in life when they magically switch bodies. After switching places and learning to appreciate each other's personal challenges, the two become closer and more appreciative of one another.[18]

Horowitz used this lesson to solve a conflict between his organization's customer support and sales engineering departments. The two departments genuinely did not get along, and the conflict escalated when the sales engineering team waged a series of complaints about a lack of responsiveness from customer support that allegedly resulted in lost sales. Customer support fired back complaints about the sales engineering team not using their tools correctly, not listening to valid solutions and being alarmists to issues of low priority.

Horowitz quickly solved these issues by requiring the leaders of each team to swap roles with one another. He told them they would keep their minds but switch "bodies" -- permanently. They quickly diagnosed the issues causing the conflict and created a set of processes that resolved the combat. From that day forward, the two teams worked better together than any other groups within the organization.

Perspective-taking exercises range from simple, fictitious role-play scenarios to real work projects where people are assigned new roles. The important thing is that coworkers embrace the opportunity to learn what is required of their teammates and how they can work better together to achieve their shared goals and develop a deepened sense of collective purpose.

- **When it comes to remote work, communication is key -- don't leave things unsaid or undocumented.** Despite many inherent challenges, fully remote workers can be your most engaged group of employees. Gallup finds that the defining factor is the frequency of meaningful communication with their manager. Remote work simply requires <u>more frequent and more explicit communication</u> to work well. Handle conflict and confusion as they happen, rather than letting them fester. This relieves

role conflict and coordination problems by routinely clarifying expectations, which ultimately takes the stressful guessing game out of remote work.

- **If your matrixed employees are burning out, investigate team size.** When employees are highly matrixed, it may not be obvious how big their "team" actually is, as they may be members of multiple teams of various sizes.

  But research on team size suggests that the larger each team is, the heavier the cognitive load and the greater the interpersonal conflict. As teams get larger, people spend less time doing their work and more time coordinating with teammates. And interpersonal problems escalate because members have trouble keeping track of and reacting to the words, deeds and moods of so many people.

  This is why the late J. Richard Hackman -- professor emeritus of social and organizational psychology at Harvard University and a famed expert on team effectiveness -- advised leaders that performance often begins to suffer when highly interdependent teams have 10 or more members.[19]

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Gallup's research on team size and manager talent (the ability to lead teams) adds an instructive twist: The right team size may depend partly on leadership skill. The most talented managers -- who are adept at motivating, directing, delegating, collaborating and strategizing -- can lead teams with 15 or even more employees without a loss of personal engagement in their work. In contrast, while moderately talented managers can handle teams of <u>up to four employees</u> with ease, their engagement drops when they lead teams with five, 10, 15 or more employees.

We suspect that the most skilled managers are able to stay engaged when leading bigger teams because they structure the work so that expectations about who does what are clearer and team members know what is important to work on right now -- and what can be delayed or simply ignored. As a result, perhaps the best managers and their charges are less plagued by overload, interpersonal problems and the associated exhaustion.

- **Show empathy and create focus during challenging times.** The pandemic has highlighted how deeply life and work are intertwined. Gallup's tracking of global emotions revealed that stress and worry were off the charts in 2020. Women with children at home had even higher levels of stress than most during this time.

  People are remarkably resilient, but nobody is infinitely powerful. Humans have cognitive limits, and now is the time to unburden your team members. Be considerate of the stressors and burnout your team is experiencing by asking how you can remove barriers and focus their work priorities. Give the gift of simplification and alleviate your team members from unnecessary stress.

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A Parting Thought: Sometimes, Matrix Just Isn't Worth the Trouble

We've shown that leaders can do much to improve performance in matrixed teams, and to avoid driving their members crazy. But sometimes the downsides of the matrix and the relentless efforts required to keep the madness from rearing its ugly head just aren't worth it.

The collaborative and highly interdependent work created by matrixed teams is especially problematic for remote and hybrid teams -- which only function well when people are relentless about making their actions and feelings explicit. And, whether work is remote, in person or some combination of the two, dealing with multiple bosses and multiple teams makes it tougher for people to coordinate efforts and sustain healthy relationships.

Although matrixed teams of some kind remain common, perhaps leaders should consider simplifying their teams and organizations to spare themselves and their employees from overload and aggravation. And when smart leaders do decide that a highly matrixed structure is the right strategic choice for their organization, they must ensure they don't just treat it as an automatic, hands-free solution. They must devote the extra thought, effort and empathy required so that people throughout the matrix can weave their work together, understand what it takes for the whole organization (not just their team) to flourish, be engaged in their work and avoid burnout.