

THE LONG-DISTANCE TEAM

**Designing Your Team
for Everyone's Success**

**KEVIN EIKENBERRY
AND WAYNE TURMEL**



**THE
LONG-DISTANCE
TEAM**

ALSO BY KEVIN EIKENBERRY AND WAYNE TURMEL

The Long-Distance Leader: Rules for Remarkable Remote Leadership

The Long-Distance Teammate: Stay Engaged and Connected While Working Anywhere

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**Designing Your Team for
the Modern Workplace**

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*To our wives Lori and Joan who have
been our biggest supporters and fans for
a long time, and too often at a distance.*

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Introduction

Work and how we all view it has changed drastically in the past few years.

When *The Long-Distance Leader* was released in 2018, the Covid-19 pandemic hadn't yet begun. *The Long-Distance Teammate* was published in January of 2021, nearly a year after a third of the workforce was suddenly working from home. We were told, "you were in the right place at the right time." We were, but it wasn't because of a pandemic. It was because, for nearly a decade, we had been looking at how work was changing and what it meant.

How and where we work was changing before the cataclysmic events of a pandemic. And although much is different, the biggest underlying factors about work haven't changed:

- There is still work to be done.
- Most of it is done with and for other people.
- Ninety-five percent of people want to do good and meaningful work 95 percent of the time.
- The key players are humans, who are both amazing and messy.

More than any of us can read has been written about work, working in teams, and getting those teams to get great results together. Most of those

principles remain. But the context (where, when, and how people work) and our concept of work (how it fits into our life, and what we want work to look like) have changed greatly.

Let's be clear, this book is not "making teams work in a post-Covid world." In fact, as you read the book, you'll find few specific references to the global pandemic or its impact on teams. Partly this is an effort to make the book less restricted to a specific time in history and to maintain the big picture. But it's also because this shift didn't suddenly happen with the appearance of a specific virus. The way we work was already shifting under our feet. The events of the early 2020s simply made it clear to everyone (like it or not) that the old ways of thinking about our jobs and careers had already shifted. Those events simply put the need for us to reexamine some of our assumptions, behaviors, and decisions on fast-forward. We have much more to say about this new view of work later in Chapter 5, but this context sets the stage for this book.

Work, teams and teamwork, and the culture in which we do it all will remain important. Since all those things are changing, the way we think about, design around, and intentionally create those things must change too.

In the *Long-Distance Leader* we encouraged leaders to think "leadership first and location second." This is our way of saying not everything is new in your role—but what *is new* matters a whole lot. The same is true for this book. We will not take you through many of the things you know about traditional ways teams come together and help people work together successfully. Rather, we will help you intentionally design or redesign those teams in a world in which people may be working in different locations, at different times, and in different ways—and perhaps never (or rarely ever) see each other face to face.

In this context of a (rapidly) changing world of work, this book is about two important and overlapping factors: team design and culture.

What Are They and How Are They Different?

We will readily admit we have talked a lot about these two terms between ourselves and with clients, and often the words have been used interchangeably. Both are, in some ways, about how the work is done. However, we think there are important differences, and understanding the differences sets the stage for adjusting and applying both better in our working worlds. In short, we think of *team design* as how we organize around the nature of the work, and *culture* is how we do that work each day.

Let's be more specific.

Team Design

Team design is about framework, structure, and format. It is, at least at a high level, predefined (lots more about that to come). Team design addresses the what of the work, the why of the work, when the work is done, and by whom. How we intentionally design our teams needs to change, and we will help you do that through the ideas and practices in this book. It includes things like these:

- How we organize and define teams
- What reporting structures and connections between teams look like
- How team design is reflected in the policies about where and when people work and in job descriptions

In the past this has been determined by historical perspective, tradition, and accepted standards. It has been defined by boxes and organizational charts. With all the change swirling around us, tradition may be a good place to start, but overly relying on it doesn't serve us. Rather, team

design (if your organization, team, or project is new) or redesign (if teams exist but could be more effective) should be dictated *by the needs of the work itself*.

Culture

Culture is about how we do our work and isn't about structure. Culture is more about daily behavior, the working environment, and how people feel when working. Culture is separate from team design because you could have very different structures and have similar cultures—or you could have similar structures and vastly different cultures. Culture doesn't have to be intentionally designed; it exists in every group of people. Where some external decisions and policies drive team design, culture naturally occurs as humans interact and adapt to each other. It includes things like these:

- Levels of engagement, accountability, and commitment
- The strength (or not) of relationships and trust
- How we deal with change
- The role of learning
- What we expect of/from each other

Culture always exists. There are pressures from some to take us back to a previous version and vision of culture—like it was some golden age. Successful organizations, teams, leaders, and individuals will intentionally seek an aspirational culture and want to work toward it. Creating and working toward an aspirational culture in this new world of work will create new, exciting results for everyone involved.

This book will help you do both—design or redesign your team and create and move toward the culture you want and need for everyone's

success. We realize this isn't a one-time fix. Designing teams and refining culture is an ongoing process. We want to equip you for that journey.

You might be reading this thinking that team design and work and culture are enmeshed in ways that make it so you can't pull them apart. At the end of the day these concepts are interconnected. But for us to have highly effective teams and organizations that both get great work done and do it in ways that engage, enrich, and create enjoyment for those who do it, we must first separate these components.

We will intentionally look at the ideas of team design (or redesign) and culture development separately so that they can be joined in the real world in ways that create great synergy—even if the team operates at long distance.

We've written this book with your long-term success in mind. Some of the ideas are mentioned in our previous books. Although this book stands alone, the ideas in the others are necessarily connected to and support the ideas and actions in this book. Why? Because the basics of great teamwork and the challenges of working at a distance are consistent and apply no matter your formal position.

It doesn't matter if you are a senior leader, a mid-level manager, a front-line leader, or an individual who wants to help craft the environment in which you work. Ideas, questions, exercises, and resources are available throughout this book to help you design the team and culture you desire. When you do this work, you will be able to consistently create highly successful Long-Distance Teams.

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Part I

Getting Started— Defining the Overused Terms

Some words get overused in business books. The problem is that people all nod as if they understand them, either because they think they do or because they don't want people to think they are behind—or dense. When we get to this point, we need to step back and clarify what these words mean. In these first chapters we will do that to set the table for everything that follows.

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Chapter 1

What Is a Team, and Why Does It Matter?

Kris has recently been promoted to project manager of a software development team that works remotely, mostly from home, across three countries. Several of the team members have worked together on past projects, but many are new to the company. She has six direct reports, but each works on their own tasks and seldom interacts with their teammates. Although the work gets done, she doesn't feel they are a team so much as a bunch of people who all work through her. Even though tasks are completed, and deadlines met, she wonders if there isn't something missing.

The last few years have changed how we work. When working from home exploded, a lot of leaders focused on just keeping the organization going. Can people meet deadlines and do good work when they aren't co-located? Will people put in the discretionary effort and communication efforts that have always been hallmarks of great teams? Can we keep the (figurative) doors open and stay in business until we go back to the office?

Those concerns were (and are) important, but they focused on immediate problems—putting out fires, as so many of us call it. Although it is easy to stay in fire-fighting mode, as leaders, we must put down the firehose and look to the future. When and where do people need to work to create great results? Can we collaborate effectively in new ways we haven't yet thought about? Although a two-year pandemic forced some of those questions on us, we can't let the need to look forward and be proactive and intentional be a one-time pandemic-related response.

One of the most common questions we hear across organizations is this: “How do we create a ‘one-team’ workplace when we aren't in close proximity to each other all the time?”

Since you've invested in this book, you're probably at that stage yourself. You want a work environment that is more than individuals working for and answering to the same manager. Whether you're an individual contributor looking for the perfect workplace, a manager responsible for getting work done, or a senior leader charged with becoming an employer of choice, you have something in common. You want to be part of a high-performing, collaborative, innovative *team*. Whether you are leading a team that's been together for years, taking over an existing unit, or starting from scratch, you will be far more successful when you have considered answers to these questions:

- What kind of team is necessary to get the work done?
- What kind of team do you want to be part of?
- Can you create a team culture that meets those aspirations?

These questions are all important, and answering them is the focus of this book. But you can't really answer them without clearly defining one term.

What do we mean when we use the word, *team*?

Our old friend *Merriam-Webster* defines the word *team* this way:

1. A group of people who compete in a sport, game, etc., against another group
2. A group of people who work together to achieve a goal [for our purposes we can assume *together* doesn't have to mean physically]
3. A group of animals used to pull a wagon, cart, etc.

Assuming you aren't an athlete or an ox, definition two applies to most of us. Technically Kris, in the earlier story, has a team. All those smart programmers working on their tasks and answering to her are her *team*. But she (and likely you) feels like that isn't a satisfying answer. There must be more to being a great team than simply sharing a manager.

We agree.

A Quick Exercise

Take a blank sheet of paper and a pen. (You can use your computer or phone, but you'll likely get better results if you engage kinesthetically. Trust us.)

Set a timer for five minutes. When it starts, write down all the words, positive and negative, that you associate with the word *team*. When time is up, stop and look at the list. What words came to mind?

Everyone's lists will be different, but we have been doing this exercise for over twenty years and it's a good bet you included terms such as these:

- Helpful
- Aligned
- Collaborative
- Friendly (or at least collegial)