A really powerful way to get things done within organizations is to form high-performance teams. And there’s a world of a difference between a high-performing team and a committee or a working party.

Within my current organization, we formed a series of teams called STAR teams - Strategic Teams for Action and Review. We’ve been very careful to select the people on those teams, we’ve kept them typically to a very small number, and we’ve chosen very specific projects. We’ve said from the outset: “Okay, this project is going to last for six months or nine months” - typically no longer than six months actually, because it’s a timeline everyone can buy into. We set out the number of meetings that we’re going to have so we don’t have endless meetings, without any objectives. And we really focus on what do we want the specific outcomes to be. We write them up, share them, make sure that everyone is clear about them, and set to work.

In the case of one recent STAR team that we formed, we had an objective to try, because it was very important within the organization to keep costs in line with revenue. We had an objective to save a million Pounds of discretionary costs within the organization. After nine months, we actually achieved 1.5 million of savings. And the most important thing for the organization was not just the savings, although they were important, but it was really the fact that the service levels within those areas had dramatically improved, that we managed to bring in through the team’s efforts new suppliers, that they had been really very helpful in terms of developing our client relationships. And, internally, people really appreciated that too. So, the power of that team in terms of getting that task done was really, really, really excellent.

I think we’ve all been part of teams that perhaps don’t work, and when you think about what it is that makes a team not work, it’s usually because it has too many people in it. We’ve generally found that seven people is about the maximum people that we can have in a really good, tight-knit, close team. Another reason it doesn’t work is sometimes because it doesn’t have a very clear objective. It might be a general objective to improve customer service. Well, that team could meet for a lifetime and still not achieve anything. So, making the objective clear is really important.

I think the other thing that doesn’t work is if there is a never-ending goal for the team to continue to meet, because people get very weary of meetings generally. [chuckles] I think they find that it’s a lot more rewarding if they know what their commitment is going to be and how they can contribute to success.

When we did achieve the objectives and when we were part of the way there and we achieved certain milestones, we made sure that we not only celebrated success within the team, but told the organization about it as well. So, everybody knew and was able to give positive feedback. I think making sure that the team knew that what they were doing was really important to the organization was essential in terms of success.

I think it is important within a high-performance team to disband the team when it’s finished. There’s nothing worse than feeling that you just keep on turning up to meetings if a team now has run out of things to do. I think what works really well is when the objective is achieved, you do disband the team, formally, and they can go off and put their energies elsewhere. Getting things done is really about collective effort all aligned in the same direction. Our experience is that if you get a high-performance team all aligned in the same objective, that’s a really powerful way to bring new ideas, to challenge new ideas, and to achieve objectives within a stated timeframe.