emergence

Reforming Culture

Self-Selection:
The ultimate booster of autonomy and engagement

Sandy Mamoli

Imagine, just for a moment, that I walked into your organisation and asked everyone to down tools for a day and get into teams of their choosing. That I asked everyone to choose who they wanted to work with and what they wanted to work on.

Think about what would happen. Would people organically place themselves into teams that worked? Teams that could deliver on their purpose? And do this across the entire organisation so that **ALL** teams worked? Or would it be chaos? Would everyone want to be on one team and leave another team empty? Would there be some areas that nobody wanted to work in? What about people—would there be people nobody wanted to work with, much like the kid in the school yard who always got picked last? Would there be an A-team, while everyone else was left to their own devices?

I promise you, with right preparation and a well-facilitated process, self-organising teams *will* be possible in *your* organisation.

But why would you even want to?

Isn't this just a risky and complicated way of doing something as simple as creating teams? Surely management already knows best how to structure their people? Does this process actually solve a problem?

We know that in our current world of ambiguity, uncertainty and constant change, the best work is done in teams. Specifically, in small, cross-functional, high-performing teams.

We also know that high performing teams are made up of motivated individuals. Daniel Pink's research shows what motivates people: autonomy, mastery and purpose.

Purpose: That's the companies we work for, the customers we're helping, the people whose problems we're solving. Purpose is the reason we go to work every day.

Mastery: We've got that covered— we hire competent people and give them the opportunity to learn and develop.

Autonomy: This is what Self-Selection is all about. People choosing their own teams, choosing who they want to work with, choosing their team members and choosing what they work on is the ultimate booster for a culture of ownership.

In short, we want Self-Selection in order to have motivated people working in high-performing teams. It is also the fastest, most efficient way to get into the teams that are right for your people and for your company.

That's quite a claim to make—and I know that many of you still think this is never going to work.

Here's how it works

In a nutshell, you organise a session where everyone gets together (either in-person or remotely) and chooses which team they want to work in.

The process is iterative, facilitated, and looks like this:

1. Set up the Room

Whether in-person or remote, we recommend getting to the event early so you have plenty of time to set up the physical or virtual room and lay out all your materials. The last thing you want is for a team to solve a problem during the day but not be able to reflect it on the finished product because you're short of sticky notes or haven't locked your Miro board.

2. Product Owner Presentations

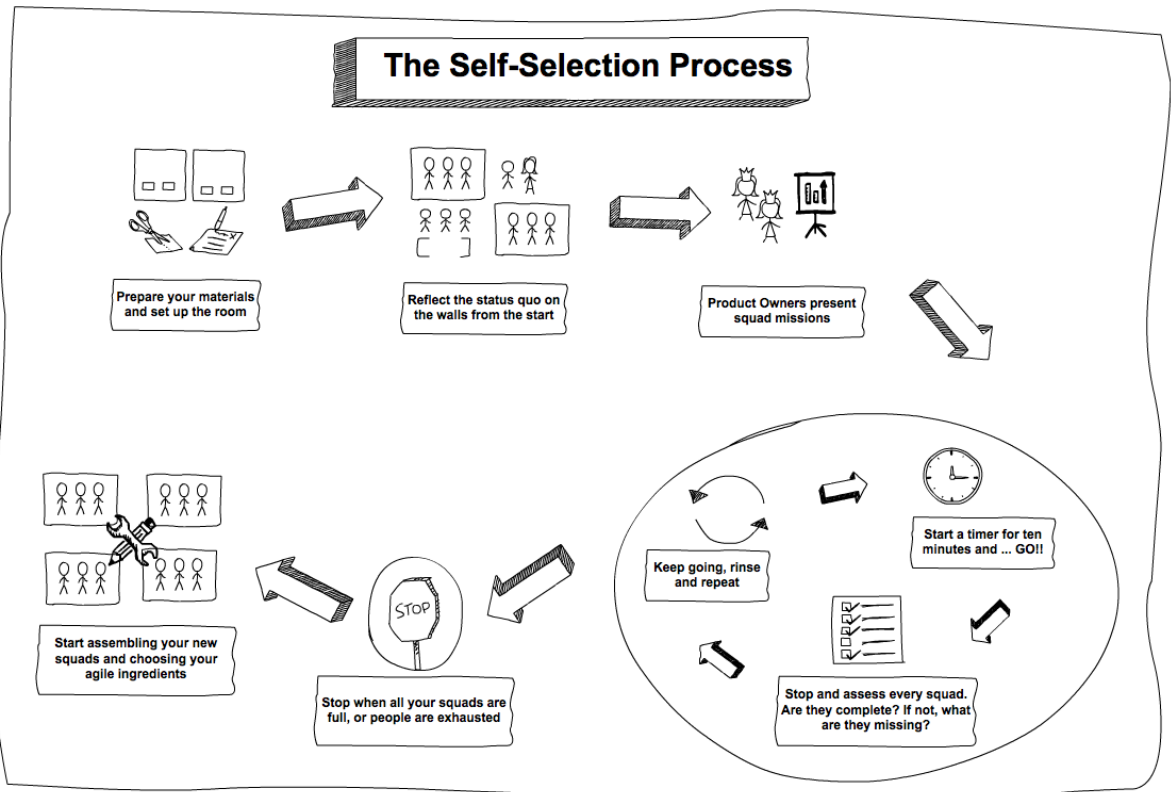People need to know what they will be signing up for. They also need the opportunity to ask questions, so the day should start with the product owners standing up to explain to the group what their team is all about: their purpose and the types of things they will work on. Current projects should be explained too, but projects can change so you should be aware that this could be the wrong level of detail. The type of product the team will support and the type of work (front end vs back end, for example) might be more appropriate.

3. Explain the Rules

Talk people through the rules for the event, and have the rules displayed prominently around the room.

4. Go!

Start your first self-selection round. This is where people walk around, talk to product owners, and think about which team they want to join. When they choose a team, they blu-tac their photo into that team diagram.

The Self-Selection Process

Prepare your materials and set up the room

Reflect the status quo on the walls from the start

Product Owners present squad missions

Start assembling your new squads and choosing your agile ingredients

STOP

Stop when all your squads are full, or people are exhausted

Keep going, rinse and repeat

Start a timer for ten minutes and ... GO!!

Stop and assess every squad. Are they complete? If not, what are they missing?

Be strict on timing. A 10-minute timebox is enough for people to have the conversations they need to have and to overcome any nerves about moving or selecting a team.

When the time is up, be very strict about stopping for your first 'checkpoint'.

5. Checkpoint

It's vital to check in and publicise each team's current status after each round. To do this we use a checkpoint. At the end of each timebox, everyone stops. Checklists and other visual indicators are used to show how many full teams you have at this point in time.

If this is your first checkpoint then don't expect to have solved the problem. The hope at each checkpoint is that one group will say they are missing two developers, for example, and another group will demonstrate an over-supply of developers, thereby ensuring those two groups can talk during the next round.

One by one, a self-appointed spokesman from each team should announce:

- Whether the team is full
- What gaps they have
- Any problems or blocks they have encountered

6. Rinse and Repeat

The 10-minute timeboxes, each followed by a checkpoint, should repeat indefinitely until all the problems are solved, or the same problems are being repeated and people appear to be stuck.

If the problem is solved, congratulations! You can send everyone home! If the problem isn't solved it's time to change gears and tweak the format.

7. Tackle the outstanding problems

You may want to send people who are part of new, fully formed teams home at this point. You could then change the room format to bring people closer together. If you still have problems that aren't being solved by more rounds of self-selection then you may have to dive into them head-first.

The detail will vary according to the specific problem being solved and the people involved. Usually the process involves tackling one obvious problem or bottleneck at a time and engaging the whole group to solve the problem.

For example, in a recent self-selection we had a shortage of designers. No matter which way we cut it, we couldn't make fully formed squads. One solution would have been to thinly spread the people we had across multiple teams, but that would have left everyone short. So, as a group, we decided to populate as many full teams as we could and then use empty cards to represent the people we needed to hire after the event. This was great information to have: prior to the event we didn't know who we needed to hire or which teams they would join.

8. Make it real

At the end of a self-selection event you will have a lot of paper and hopefully lots of self-selected fully skilled teams. Diagrams are not reality! You need to go about making this real by meeting with each new team the very next day. It's vital that you build upon the momentum you've created, so don't let people go back to their day jobs. The Lean Coffee meeting format usually works really well for talking to each team, allowing them to voice any concerns, and importantly to start talking about how and when to set the team in motion.

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Quite often other work will need to be finished first so creating a schedule is important. It's then a case of keeping momentum going as your new teams work through their scheduled backlog and then turn their energies to new projects.

What the data shows

After nine years of Self-Selection, the jury is in: It can work for any organisation, from small (15-20 people) to large (several thousands). It has been done face-to-face and virtually in several different locations.

We also know that most people like the process and the results. After each self-selection session we survey participants about their experiences and expectations, and every single time our results show that most people like the team they end up joining. Surprisingly, most people tell us that they now work with the team they expected to work with, so people seem to go into the day with some expectations about the outcome.

After the day, almost everyone is in favour of self-selection as the best way to design teams. Even people who initially fear and doubt the process come away with a positive attitude.

There will always be people who don't like the idea of self-selection and we have never forced anyone to participate in the sessions. We have always given people the opportunity to opt out by leaving their photo in a "Need a team" area, allowing other people to pick and assign them.

The opportunity to opt out is important, not only for people who don't want to take this kind of responsibility but also for those who are very new to the business. Picking a team in your first week on a new job is a lot to ask.

Surveys also show that the self-selection process can:

- provide employees with insight into what other teams and parts of the business do

- reinforce that employees are trusted by leadership to make decisions about their work and goals

- demonstrate that difficult decisions can be made without anyone getting dictatorial

- build stronger working relationships between people and departments that might never see each other in a typical working day

In addition, self-selected squads have been proven to be more stable than management-selected teams. They also appear to be more productive and experience fewer personality clashes and petty disagreements.

Data also shows that people are happier, more motivated and more productive if they can select which team they work in. They simply feel more ownership of their work!

To retain these benefits after your first Self-Selection, we recommend allowing people to self-select every six to nine months. Our data shows that this is the best time frame to check if any changes to team composition need to be made and to ensure that everyone is still working in the team they want.

Now what?

Since the pandemic, many people work fully or partially from home. As a result, many feel isolated, not trusted by management and simply disengaged. The great resignation is happening and talent is scarce.

A culture of ownership and autonomy has become more important than ever. Self-selection is the perfect tool to drive a culture of engagement, and you can use it to create a company that allows everyone the freedom to choose who to work with and what to work on. Take that bold step forward and empower your teams today!
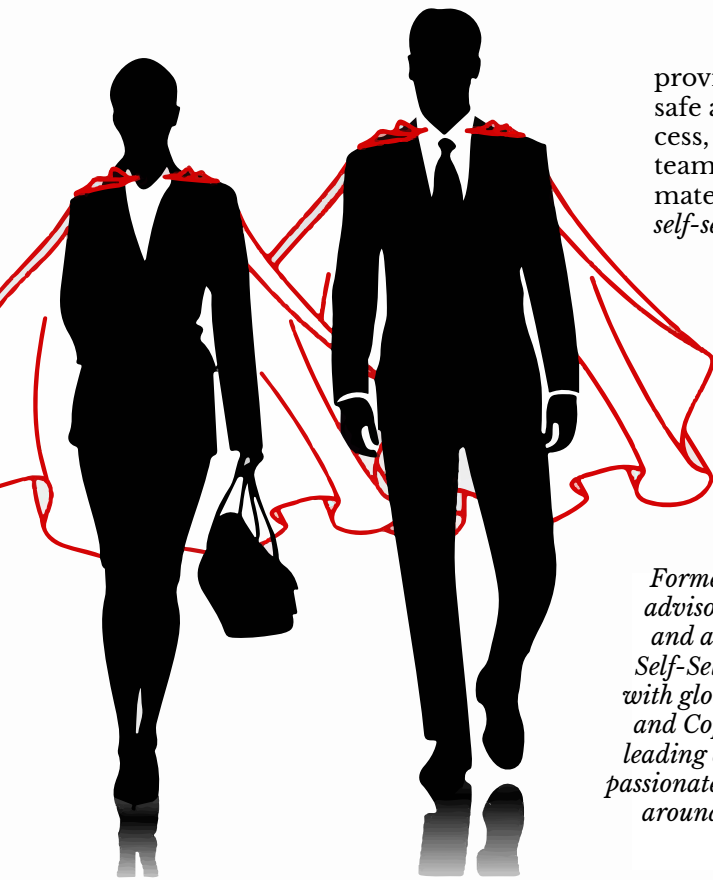
Want to learn more?

My colleague David Mole and I have gathered all our stories and data from conducting this process in companies across the globe and distilled it into a book: *Creating Great Teams - How Self-Selection Lets People Excel.*


This practical "how-to" guide provides detailed facilitation plans for a safe and enjoyable self-selection process, as well as how to make the resulting teams a reality. You can also read all our materials at *nomad8.com/what-we-do/ self-selection* ⓔ

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Former Olympian Sandy Mamoli is an Agile advisor, coach, international keynote speaker, and author of Creating Great Teams – How Self-Selection Lets People Excel. From working with global enterprises in Amsterdam, Stockholm, and Copenhagen to being one of New Zealand's leading coaches, she brings her practical flair and passionate advocacy for all things Agile to businesses around the world. She has a masters degree in artificial intelligence and knows quite a lot about Agile.

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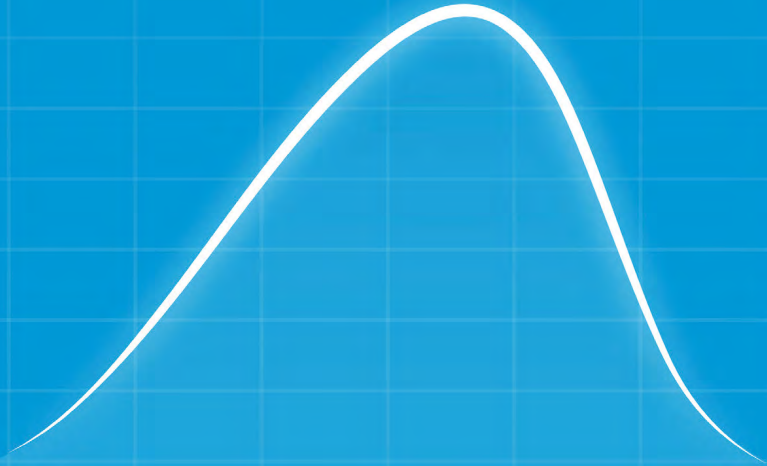
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