



Impromptu teams in a temporary organization: On their nature and role

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Abstract

The abundance and importance of temporary project teams in society introduces the need of understanding their nature. The purpose of this article thus is to highlight the existence of an only accidentally investigated type of team that we identify as Impromptu teams, and analyze their role in a temporary organization. Based on a detailed retrospective account of the infamous disaster on Mount Everest in 1996, we identify three examples of Impromptu teams. The three examples indicate that the teams are characterized by being triggered by an unexpected event, and formed through a bottom-up process, where joining the team is voluntary and the activities are based on a logic of appropriateness, rather than rule following. The identification and nature of Impromptu teams have implications far beyond Mount Everest, since most organizations at some point need to use teams similar to the identified examples.

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1. Introduction

The importance and abundance of project teams operating in organizations in contemporary society is unquestioned. Whether in the form of personalized collaboration among a few individuals or in the form of a large system, teams are an essential element. To put it bluntly, many contemporary human accomplishments would simply not exist without teams, and they are also central to the conceptualization of temporary organizations (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995). From a scholarly point of view, there has also lately been an extensive increase in the interest of teams, which have contributed with a greater understanding of both team types (see e.g. Devine 2002), team effectiveness (see e.g. Mathieu et al. 2008), and the diversity of team function and team tasks (see e.g. Hollenbeck et al. 2012).

The focus of this paper is, however, neither on the abundance, variety, nor the effectiveness in teams, but on a specific type of team, that in the literature on temporary organizations has only received limited, and somewhat accidental, attention. Our interest is on an organizational “antimatter” of regular project teams. That is, the elusive type of teams that are neither purposively assembled by management nor centered on a pre-existing or expected task. The type of team we are focusing on can, however, emerge in most contexts due to an unexpected event and via an ad hoc, bottom-up team formation process (c.f. Söderholm, 2008). We have chosen to call these teams “Impromptu teams”² referring to their improvised emergence and management. The purpose is to highlight the existence of Impromptu teams and analyze their role in a temporary organization.

In doing this, the paper generally adopts the theoretical lens of organizing features of unexpected events (Söderholm, 2008). In the paper, we will therefore initially outline the impact and importance of considering adverse events to understand how

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² The word “Impromptu” comes from Latin, meaning “in readiness” and consequently connotes improvisation in response to an event.

teams are organized. We will provide a background to the understanding of teams, their emergence in temporary organizations, and discuss the, to Impromptu teams, closely related team types. After that, we outline the explorative approach and the research methods of retrospective accounts, used as the basis for the paper. This is followed by a detailed, process oriented, account of how a series of unexpected events during the infamous climb of Mount Everest in 1996 led not only to disaster but also to the formation of Impromptu teams.

2. Theoretical background

One of the core reasons for why organized activities occur is to reduce uncertainty (Cyert and March, 1963). By creating temporary organizations and allocating people in teams and resources to different tasks, organizations try to isolate any changes to one part of their organization while upholding high efficiency (Galbraith, 1973). In fact, temporary organizations are so effective that many organizations organize a majority of their operations through projects (Whittington et al., 1999). Temporary organizations and projects are often used interchangeably. However, all projects are temporary, but not all temporary organizations are projects (Jacobsson et al. 2015). The arguably most important characteristic of a temporary organization is implied in its name: the assumption that it will only exist for a limited period of time. In essence, the temporary organization is “determinate” in its lifespan as opposed to permanent organizations being “indeterminate” in the way activities are organized (Winch, 2014). This contributes to making the temporary organization more action oriented compared to the permanent’s organization around a set of standard operation procedures (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995).

3. The nature of team activities in response to (un)expected events

The centrality of repetitiveness in permanent organizations makes it possible to develop standard operating procedures, routines, rules, and plans to guide the operations. It is, however, only so much that can be prepared since organizing is to be considered as a constant flow of adjustment to adverse events. Therefore, to understand how anything is organized, one has to consider events (Weick, 1979:1). Events are essentially bracketed occurrences and the way in which they relate becomes the outcome. This implies that the boundaries of the event are permeable as activities are part of processes that span the bracketed events.

The experience of events differs between individuals. Some perceive them as threatening, others as normal, some individuals expect events, and others do not. The level of expectedness usually follows with experience. The more experienced an individual is, the greater the likelihood is that he/she is able to see events coming. The opposite also applies: less experienced individuals have relative of the experienced individuals a narrower frame of reference and are thus more likely to experience an event as unexpected. Expected events are typically planned for or mitigated by common risk management procedures. Through planning and

mitigation, the expectations are codified and made explicit. Unexpected events, in contrast, are those events that are recognized as not unfolding according to the plan and hence require mitigation regardless of the level of experience or who perceive them as such. Furthermore, the events that have been codified in plans and risk procedures can still become unexpected since the timing and magnitude might be off (Hällgren and Maaninen-Olsson, 2005; Söderholm, 2008).

Complicating matters, there is a bias toward confirming expectations. That is, expected events are likely to be immediately recognized and the recognition of unexpected events is likely to become delayed, if at all recognized. Following the same line of reasoning, what might have been unexpected at first hand might be post-rationalized as expected (March, 2010). Concurring with past research, it is not the unexpectedness *per se* that is of interest in order to explain an outcome but the actions that follow the recognition of an event. That is, to identify and understand unexpected events, someone needs to recognize them as unexpected and act accordingly. This has spurred an interest in issues such as improvisation (Lindahl, 2002) and the management of i.e. deviations (Munthe et al., 2014; Tukiainen et al., 2010). Past research has made great contributions to the understanding of how events are resolved by i.e. the skillful assembly of resources. Geraldi et al. (2010), for example, outlined characteristics and examples of successful responses to unexpected events on an organizational, group, and individual level. In the study, the authors identified three pillars supporting successful responses. These were responsive and functioning structure, good interpersonal relationship, and competent individuals (Geraldi et al. 2010). However, beyond “good interpersonal relationship,” past research has rarely focused on the nature of the team composition/formation specifically as a part of improvisation, or as the direct response to unexpected events. Along this line of reasoning, Engwall and Svensson (2001, 2004), however, found that the organization they studied successfully designated a team and specific resources to resolve the deadlock in the development process. They argued that such management-designated team is a Cheetah team, and perhaps the “ultimate temporary organization.” In contrast to past research on unexpected events, and the management-initiated teams, we investigate the nature of self-organizing teams as a response to unexpected events since that is less explored.

4. The nature of teams in temporary organizations

Teams are generally understood as small groups of interdependent individuals who formally share responsibility for outcomes of, for example, a software project. Whether a team is dedicated to execute a given task such as attaining a mountain summit or to clearing away an obstacle that is hindering project completion such as an acute development process crisis in traditional organizations (Engwall and Westling, 2004), it generally involves a number of key elements. These are (1) interdependence for the tasks at hand between more than one individual; (2) shared responsibility for performing the tasks; (3) a sense of a common identity; (4) being embedded in a larger context or contexts; and (5) boundary-spanning (Cohen

and Bailey, 1997, p.241). Even if most groups and teams share these key elements, a differentiation is often made between formal and informal groupings, as well as between groups and teams.

Despite clear job descriptions, formally assigned groupings, and clear hierarchies, the way individuals in organizations interact and work together is not always clear-cut. As a complement to formally initiated groups (like project teams), it is well known that also informal groups exist and play an important role within organizations (Cross and Prusak, 2002). These groupings emerge somewhat spontaneously as a response to common interests, due to similar practices, individuals sharing common goals, or as a response to external threats. In comparison to formal groups, they are consequently bottom-up initiated and reliant on the commitment of the involved individuals.

While groups, on one hand, are described as having a strong and clearly focused leader, individual task focus, and little interdependency between subtasks or between individuals (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993), teams, on the other hand, are defined as having shared leadership roles, complementary skills, a collective task focus, and they strive for synergy (compare the typical assumption of a project team that relies on the latter). According to Katzenbach and Smith (1993, p.121), a team is also defined as “a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.” Following such definition, all teams are groups, but not all groups are teams. Teams are in that sense a particular subset of groups that achieve synergy because participants require individual and mutual accountability, in a way that groups do not. It should be noted that even though there exist a difference between groups and teams on a conceptual level, the terms are surprisingly often used interchangeably, and for the purpose of this paper, we do not differentiate between them.

In temporary organizations, the stability of teams is, however, often under-theorized. Engwall and Svensson (2001, 2004), however, showed that teams might in fact change considerably over time in relation to the situation at hand. For example, in response to adverse unexpected events that require specialist involvement and detailed knowledge about a product or solution. These specialists may be part of the initial project team, or they may comprise members from the outside that provide their services through consultancy (Hällgren, 2010). Also Packendorff (2002:43) takes an in-project perspective and makes a distinction between project activities as being routine work or exceptions in terms of “unique once-in-a-lifetime events, far away from everyday repetitive boredom.”

5. A conceptualization of project team types

Considering the above illustrated importance of events and drawing upon the previous discussion of team activities and teams, the nature of the task is pertinent to how the project team is formed (whether it is a matter of an expected or unexpected events) and how the team is initiated (being assigned vs. self-selected membership). When combining these two dimensions

into a matrix, a cluster of four different types of project teams is generated that differ in the way they come about, see Fig. 1. Based on this four-quadrant matrix, we can conceptually illustrate how “Impromptu teams” differ from other project team types in terms of how they emerge. Before describing the four different team types in-depth, it should be acknowledged that there exist a number of other, slightly similar, conceptualizations on a team, project, and organizational level (see e.g. Pinto and Pinto, 1990; Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008; Ekstedt 2002; Packendorff 2002; Raab et al., 2009). Despite their respective strength and proliferation, neither of them takes the starting point in the agency of the activities/tasks, in combination with an intra-organizational approach.

5.1. Project teams characterized and driven by expected events

In the first category [1] of the matrix, which we have called “routine teams,” formation of teams is assigned by management and structured to facilitate team development, an enhanced working climate, as well as to create synergy among team members. This first team type often emerges, or exists, in highly routinized projects common in, for example, the construction and manufacturing industries. According to the extensive review by Hollenbeck et al. (2012), team types such as “production teams” and “ongoing project teams” would fall into this category as they have a relatively stable membership and are assembled to solve problems, make plans or decisions, or interact with clients or customers on a regular basis.

In the second category [2], the so-called “emergent teams,” formation still occurs in relations to expected events, but it is based on a self-selected membership instead of being assigned. That is, the formation is triggered by situations where structured, management-initiated teams cannot entirely meet the requirements of the task at hand and therefore less structured groupings emerge to accommodate the situation. Examples include different kinds of informal groupings, which can be linked to the fulfillment of various personal needs among the group members (Cross and Prusak, 2002). The formation of such groups can be divided into a two-step process, where the first step is an establishment of contact and the second is a development of friendship (Festinger et al., 1963). Apart from informal groupings emerging to meet personal needs of involved individuals, this type of team can also emerge as a response to threats. Emergency care unit teams are sometimes assembled ad hoc to care for a patient when, for example, three patients need immediate care and it is necessary for

		Nature of task	
		Expected events	Unexpected events
Team initiation	Being assigned	[1] Routine teams	[3] Action teams
	Self-selected membership	[2] Emergent teams	[4] Impromptu teams

Fig. 1. Team type matrix.

the original team to split into three sub-teams. The event is thus expected but the formation is bottom-up initiated through the self-selection. The sub-teams are temporary and formed from a larger team where the individual members (such as physicians, residents, nurses) have specific skills and the team is formed on the basis of the individual's expertise and experience. Although the particular team may only have worked together in that specific constellation a few times, they tend to be drawn from the same group of people. The organization and the team thus operate under a "plug-and-play" teaming logic of how the team is formed when they care for a patient (Faraj and Xiao, 2006).

5.2. Project teams characterized and driven by unexpected events

The third category [3], called "action teams," emerges due to unexpected events and are assigned top-down and consequently suitable for handling unexpected situations. Some examples of this type include "Swift starting action teams" (STAT) (Mckinney et al., 2005; Wildman et al., 2012), and other type of "action teams" that are intentionally formed and focused on highly structured operations. A STAT team comprises well-trained experts with no, or little, previous experience of each other. The team performs its task effectively almost directly upon insertion, and the stakes are high (Mckinney et al., 2005). In a recent review of STAT teams, Wildman et al. (2012) argue that among the action teams, task forces, anesthesia teams, short-term project teams, and various disaster response teams have if not all then several of these characteristics. The nature and operations of the STAT teams and how they develop trust in one another will however differ depending on whether the contextual variables are endogenous (internal to the team, e.g. leadership) or exogenous (external to the team, e.g. fire conditions) (Wildman et al., 2012).

In the setting of temporary organizations, Engwall and Svensson (2004) also acknowledged the importance of so-called "cheetah teams" in dealing with unexpected events in product development. One of the conclusions drawn is that "a project must have the capability to execute its work according to plan while being able to deal at the same time with unplanned events that arise in the course of conducting the project," which the cheetah team is an example of (Engwall and Svensson, 2004:315). Comparing to Hollenbeck et al. (2012), teams included in this category would also be "ad hoc project and production teams" that only exist for a finite period of time manage tasks on a case-by-case basis.

In contrast to the third type, the fourth and final category [4] includes Impromptu teams and is consequently formed due to unexpected events and self-selected team formation. Impromptu team formation connotes a team that is emergent and where the task definition occurs simultaneously to the actual effort. Similar to the foregoing "action teams," Impromptu teams are triggered by the situation, for example, by an unexpected event that is manageable neither by the individual nor by previously formed groupings. But in contrast to the "action teams," Impromptu teams are, however, not assigned by management, but rather by those who themselves become team members.

Impromptu teams—the team type on which this article focuses—have received far less scholarly attention than the

previous three team types. Although the need to form an Impromptu team is appreciated in practice, knowledge regarding these teams is thus sparse and scattered. Scholars have simply assumed that an Impromptu team is much like any other team and that there is a known menu of actions to choose from (Tannenbaum et al., 2012:6–8). Such assumptions, and the acknowledgement that any larger team or organization experiencing severe stress is likely to create *ad hoc* teams to handle the situation (e.g. Weick, 1993), make it interesting and worthwhile to investigate the nature of Impromptu teams.

Looking at the sparse literature that previously has paid attention to teams formed in response to unexpected events, most have also "romanticized" them. The studies have focused on the extraordinary aspects of major events such as, for example, organizational responses to earthquakes (Hsu et al., 2002), the events of September 11, 2001 (9/11) (Tierney, 2003), the Tsunami in 2004 (Harrald, 2006), or the hijacking of United Airlines Flight 93 (Kayes, 2003). Also, due to the tragic outcome of some of these events (see e.g. the United Airlines Flight 93), a close-up detailed understanding of what actually happened is also hard to attain.

For this paper, the most important, and well-described, example of Impromptu teams is the firefighters at Mann Gulch in 1949 (Weick, 1993). The firemen arrived by parachute in order to suppress what they thought was a normal forest fire in a National Park in Montana. After an initial orientation, they joined forces with firemen from another group, developed a strategy, and approached the "hot zone." However, the situation soon developed into a life-threatening one as the fire moved rapidly and into unexpected areas. The new situation effectively caught the firemen off-guard. They had nowhere to run. After an initial attempt to manage the situation, the original team broke up into smaller teams without a common leader, and the individuals no longer shared a joint purpose beyond sheer survival. Most of the firefighters died directly in the fire or a few days after. Later investigations found that several of the dead firemen still carried their tools, including heavy chainsaws, despite the fact that the tools seriously hampered their ability to outrun the fire. By contrast, the majority of the few survivors, contrary to what a firefighter is supposed to do, made a clearing by setting fire to a piece of land. Having made the clearing, the firemen stepped onto the still hot ground, lay down, and buried themselves in the ashes while the larger forest fire raged around them. The men who did this survived (Weick, 1993).

In more mundane organization, similar unexpected situations can also occur. In a study of the working practices in a software company, Alby and Zuccheromaglio (2006) observed an event where the site the company maintained was down. Such an event was considered a serious problem and called for immediate attention and action, and more importantly, the formation of a team responsible of handling the situation. Within seconds, designers and engineers were gathered and involved in deciding on how to proceed. In that case, the Impromptu team was composed by the people that were within the bubble of relevance for the immediate solution of putting the site online again, excluding people that were considered outside the solution.

Reflecting on the mentioned examples, as well as other literature on how teams are formed in response to unexpected events (Kozlowski and Bell, 2003:21), it is clear that they have above focused on individuals rather than paying attention to the nature of the situation and the team as such (for a notable exception, see Weick, 1993). At the same time, one of the greatest deficiencies in the current theorizing about teams is a lack of attention to the underlying dimensions and characteristics. In turn, making such a distinction provides an opportunity to make a significant contribution by aiding theoretical advances and practical relevance (Kozlowski and Bell, 2003:59). Despite the insights gained from the given examples, there is consequently still a lack of research that explains the existence and nature of Impromptu teams in temporary organizations.

6. Method

In order to investigate the existence of Impromptu teams and analyze their nature, we have relied on an explorative case study and re-analyzed the Mount Everest 1996 disaster as an example of a temporary organization. Following previous research on mountaineering expeditions (Elmes and Barry, 1999; Kayes, 2004; Rosen, 2007; Tempest et al., 2007; see Elmes and Frame, 2008 for a notable exception), and due to the elusiveness of Impromptu teams, this paper relies on retrospective accounts of the events unfolding on Mount Everest in the spring of 1996 (Boukreev and DeWalt, 1998; Breashears, 1999; Gammelgaard, 1999; Krakauer, 1997; Kropp and Lagerkrantz, 2002; Weathers, 2000). Before discussing the data collection and analysis, it is thus relevant to briefly reflect on the relevance of the mountaineering context and climbing expeditions as temporary organizations.

6.1. Context and case selection

Recently scholars have started to pay attention to mountaineering expeditions as a way to understand and explain common features of temporary organizations and projects (Rouleau et al., 2013; Hällgren, 2010; Elmes and Frame, 2008). Common features include the central concepts of temporary organizations; time, task, team, and transition (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995). Similar to other temporary organizations, mountaineering expeditions are expected to end once the pre-set conditions are met, i.e. returning safely from the summit. On Mount Everest, most expeditions undertake their climbs during May–June, with a 5–10 day weather window. Once the window has passed climbing is no longer possible. The task (or goal) of the mountaineers is to summit (if possible) and return safely back to base camp. Particularly, in commercial expeditions, the participants climb as a team, with a dedicated project manager/expedition leader, guides/supervisors, and clients (Tumbat and Belk, 2011). Similar to cross-functional project teams (Pinto and Pinto 1990), the cooperation in expeditions thus stems from functional interdependence. Climbing expeditions are, however, subject to mutual interdependence, in contrast to a sequential interdependency in traditional projects. The transition in expeditions is represented by the experience of climbing—similar to the experience of arranging

an event such as the Olympic games, rather than a physical representation such as a bridge. To accomplish the goal of reaching the summit, planning, risk assessments, logistics, control methods, and leadership is necessary means. For example, extensive and detailed plans are made for how to transport and when to use resources. See a comparison to construction projects in Table 1.

As can be observed in Table 1, mountain climbing expeditions hence overlap significantly with “general projects” and by that do carry relevance for teams in general (Kamphuis et al., 2011) and project teams in particular (Kayes, 2004:1282; Tempest et al., 2007:1044). Mountaineering expeditions, however, carry extreme features of temporary organizations and provide a ground for learning about projects, specifically why and how actions come about.

7. Data collection

The data used as a basis for case description and analysis include in total six books, approximately 1200 pages. These books used are based on eyewitness accounts of the events but written for the public and may thus contain in-voluntary participation bias, for example, there are discrepancies between Krakauer’s and Boukreev’s book about the processes, i.e. guiding style, leading up to the events. The events per se and how the teams were formed (i.e. the focus of this article) are, however, described in a similar fashion in the analyzed material. Using retrospective accounts is a result of the inherent problem of studying Impromptu teams as they occur in a surprising fashion and generally in response to extreme events. An alternative to the retrospective account would be interviews. However, the extensive availability of detailed accounts of the events makes thorough cross-account analyses possible, compensating for the possible benefits of interviews. With an interest in the fine-grained features of the Impromptu team’s existence, a meaningful qualitative retrospective case study is

Table 1
Climbing expeditions and temporary organizations (adapted from Hällgren, 2007:775).

	Climbing expedition	Construction projects as temporary organizations
Time	May–June (on Everest)	I.e. 1st of Jan.–30th of Oct.
Task	Execute a safe climb	The erection of a building
Team	The members of the expedition	The project team
Transition	An experience	From timber to building
Interdependence	Cross-functional, mutual	Cross-functional, sequential
Cost	Food, water, and gear	People, resources, etc.
Planning methods	The route and the necessary resources	The project plan and the resources to acquire it
Control methods	Physical securing during the climb and assessment of personal and mountain conditions. Later on the breakdown of the path into small objectives.	Project plan, work bread down structure, earned value, CPM, PERT, etc.
Risk management	The identification and mitigation of i.e. late logistics	The identification and mitigation of i.e. late logistics
Management task	Logistics, stakeholders, subcontractors, clients etc.	Logistics, stakeholders, subcontractors, clients, etc.

thus achievable. Also, untraditional contexts such as mountaineering also have the potential to reveal otherwise tacit processes in organizations (Whetten, 2009) by offering new perspectives on shared phenomena, such as team formation to which more traditional organizations can be juxtaposed (Hannah et al., 2009:898).

7.1. Analytical process

Similar to Weick (1993), the accounts of the events were coded in a timeline according to how they unfolded (see also Langley, 1999; Smith, 2002). The accuracy of the timeline was thereafter further verified using Kayes (2004) and Elmes and Barry (1999). In total, 26 events were identified through the coding process. An event was coded as a trigger for team formation when there was no apparent connection to expected everyday practice, and when two or more people joined up to pursue a common goal (Cohen and Bailey, 1997). On Mount Everest, this occurred when, for example, the clients joined together to make it back to camp 4. On the other hand, normal practice was maintained when, for example, clients persevered when no one turned them back. We analyzed the events through an inductive approach where we iterated between empirical data and emerging patterns (Langley, 1999). In practice, this meant time-lining the events, identifying when teams were split up, and then going back and forth between the different sources of data looking for concurring or rejecting explanations to the same event, then back again to investigate how that corresponds to other patterns on how new teams are initiated. These patterns were consequently identified based on whether the event, from the actors point of view, was expected or unexpected (Söderholm, 2008), and the team initiation was formed by being assigned or through a self-selecting membership process (c.f. Mckinney et al., 2005; Wildman et al., 2012). Whereas one can assume there will be unexpected events in any setting, here an unexpected event included a situation that the actors could not predict before hand and thus took them with surprise. For team formation, a self-selecting membership process would include members coming together with a shared motivation, without being formally designated to cooperate by someone in charge. For example, how one of the guides (Beidleman) gathered clients around him, and how they together made their way down from the summit. When having identified the patterns of split-up and reformation based on shared motivation, we again went back to the data in order to investigate the “why and how” of each formation. In the case of Beidleman (mentioned above), the gathering of clients were not so much of a deliberate plan since the group consisted of clients from several expeditions that shared the common goal of immediate survival. Eventually, three significant examples with similar patterns of Impromptu teams were identified. In Table 2, the timeline including the identified events and patterns are presented.

7.2. The 1996 Mount Everest disaster revisited

One of the worst accidents in the climbing history is the one that unfolded on Mount Everest in the spring of 1996.

Based on retrospective accounts (Boukreev and DeWalt, 1998; Breashears, 1999; Gammelgaard, 1999; Krakauer, 1997; Kropp and Lagerkrantz, 2002; Weathers, 2000), this is a chronological account of the fatal events that unfolded between the 9th and 12th of May 1996.

7.3. Chronology of events of April–May 1996

At the beginning of April 1996, several groups of climbers, independently of one another, set up as teams in Kathmandu, Nepal. At first, staying in Kathmandu, the unfolding of events was leisurely and far away from the highest mountain in the world—Mount Everest. Each of the teams’ members needed to acclimatize to the thin air. Once the teams arrived at their base camp on the lower parts of Everest, they discovered that several other expeditions were also about to attempt the ascent. Among the teams at base camp at that time were five major teams involved in the events: (1) Scott Fischer’s “Mountain Madness” team; (2) Rob Hall’s “Adventure Consultants” team; (3) David Breashears’s “IMAX” team; (4) a South African team; and (5) a Taiwanese team. In Table 3, the involved teams, team leaders, climbers, and their nationality are presented. Note that the table is not a complete account of all participants, but the central actors in the unfoldment of the events as described in the case.

7.4. 9th of May, about 12 a.m. to 7 a.m. The expeditions start to ascend

In clear weather at midnight 9th of May, “Mountain Madness,” “Adventure Consultants,” and the Taiwanese team started from Camp IV for the summit. By starting at this time, the Taiwanese team broke an earlier agreement with the other teams to limit the first push to only two expeditions. This decision by the Taiwanese team would later contribute to a traffic jam higher up on the way to the summit.

During the ascent, some climbers proved to be more skillful and/or strong as climbers and were soon ahead of others. When Boukreev (guide) and Krakauer (client) arrived at the “Balcony” (a visually distinct low-level plateau of the Everest landscape), they waited for their team members as ordered by Scott Fischer, their team leader. During the more than 90 min they spent waiting, several climbers passed them. By 7:10 a.m., the expedition team had arrived and was ready to continue.

7.5. About 11 a.m. to 12 noon. No rope at Hillary’s step

Further up, to get around “Hillary’s step,” a notorious bottleneck passage on Mount Everest for any team going the usual route, team leaders Fischer and Hall had previously, at base camp, agreed that the Sherpas would ascend in advance and fix the ropes. When Krakauer (client) arrived at 11 a.m., there were, however, no ropes, and he waited for an hour in the hope that the Sherpas would arrive. When they failed to arrive, Beidleman (guide), together with a few other climbers, and Sherpas began to fix the ropes themselves. The fixing of the ropes took an additional hour. With the 2-hour delay, a queue of climbers built up waiting for their turn to ascend Hillary’s

Table 2
Timeline with events and patterns.

No.	Approx. time	Events	Activities	Split-up and reformation into Impromptu teams	Motivation of reformation
1	<10th of May	Delayed gear	Some essential gear was delayed coming in to Katmandu. Guides and clients stuck in Katmandu. Unplanned helicopter flight		
2	<10th of May	Base camp establishment	Due to bad weather, the establishment of the base camp was delayed by some days. Guides and clients stuck on the way		
3	10th of May	Broken promise	The Taiwanese expedition broke their promise not to start the ascent on the 9th. Ended with three expeditions simultaneously on the mountain		
4	5:40 am–7:10 am	Balcony	Krakauer et al. waited for expedition leader below the Balcony. The climbers waited for 90 min due to earlier decision		
5	~8 am	Climber short-roped	Sandy Hill Pittman short-roped by ascending Sherpa		
6	11 am - 1 pm	Hillary's step	Krakauer et al. forced to wait below Hillary's step as no ropes were fixed. Waited another hour for the ropes to be fixed		
7	~1 pm	Queue	Waiting above Hillary's step allowed weaker climbers to form a queue.		
8	~2:30 pm	Weather deterioration	2.30–3 pm it started snowing and a mist arrived		
9	1:40 pm–3:10 pm	Summit wait	Hall (expedition leader) waiting for Hansen more than 90 min, well after a safe turnaround time.	[IT1 & IT2] Split-up and reformation into two teams.	Appropriateness/consequence Appropriate to wait for ascending client, consequences for others to stay too long
10	3:30 pm	Expedition leader ascent	At 3:30, Fischer (expedition leader) was still ascending. Slow and tormented. Clients are descending already	[IT3] Split-up and reformation into two teams.	Appropriateness/consequence Appropriate to help weak climbers, consequences for others to not descend
11	~3:40 pm	Pittman collapses	The previously short-roped climber (Hill Pittman) collapses	(IT2)	
12	~4 pm	Fischer short-roped	Fischer hypothermic and seem to suffer from cerebral edema and is therefore short-roped	(IT3)	
13	4 pm	Climber waiting	Weathers eyesight was lost on ascent. He promised to wait for Hall. Ended up waiting for hours. Eventually gets help by Beidleman's (guide) ascending group	[IT2] Reformation to include Weathers	Appropriateness Situation not yet extreme, helps struggling client
14	4:31 pm	Hall and Hansen descend	In need of canned oxygen, Hall and Hansen are put in the belief that there are none in the cache	(IT1)	
15	5:30 pm	Weather deterioration	The weather changes to hurricane forces. A climber (Harris) walks off the edge and dies	(IT2)	
16	8 pm	Huddle	Beidleman's group huddle in the hurricane as several are incapacitated, unable to locate themselves	(IT2)	
17	~8 pm	Limited backup	A guide (Boukreev) tries to summon people for rescue attempt. He fails as the others are worn out		
18	Night	Weather break	Beidleman locates some stars and members of the team are able to locate Camp IV, leaving five individuals behind.	[IT2] Split-up of IT2, reformation into IT3	Consequence Risks the lives of everyone by staying put and/or bringing along due to weakness
19	Night	Rescue attempt of remaining huddling climbers	Beidleman et al. meet Boukreev (guide) who saves 3 of the 5 individuals left behind	(IT3)	
20	Morning, 11th of May	Out of batteries	The disaster-struck expeditions run out of batteries. South African expedition refuses to help		
21	9:30 am	Rescue attempt of Hall	Attempt to rescue Hall fails	[IT4 for IT1] Reformation of fit climbers	Appropriateness Appropriate to help struggling climbers

Table 2 (continued)

No.	Approx. time	Events	Activities	Split-up and reformation into Impromptu teams	Motivation of reformation
22	~9:30 am	Rescue attempt of Fischer and Gau	Attempt to rescue Fischer and Gau is successful but Fischer does not respond and is left for dead	[IT5 for IT3] Reformation of team to include guides (Sherpas) fit to climb	Appropriateness Appropriate to help struggling climbers
23	Morning	Search party for Weathers and Namba	A search party locates the remains of huddling group (Weathers and Namba). Alive but dying. Left to die.	[IT6 for IT2] Reformation of team to include guides (Sherpas) fit to climb	Appropriateness Appropriate to help struggling climbers
24	4:30 pm	Climber returns from the dead	Weathers (client) staggers into camp. Is put in tent that blows to pieces.		
25		Rescue preparations	Other expeditions on the mountain try to aid in the rescue of the exposed climbers	[IT7] Split-up of original team and goal. Reformation to help	Appropriateness Appropriate to help struggling climbers of other expeditions with manpower and resources
26	12th of May	Helicopter rescue	The highest rescue ever performed helicopters Weathers and Gau off Everest		

step. At 11:30 a.m., three climbers under Hillary's step from "Adventure Consultants" decided to turn back since they estimated that they would not make it to the summit by 1 p.m. The rule of thumb for all Everest climbers is that one must turn back by 1 p.m. to be "quite safe"; turning back after 2 p.m. is "pushing one's luck"; while to turn back after 3 p.m. is "extremely dangerous."

7.6. About 12:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. Climbers reach the summit

The first climber to achieve the goal of reaching the summit was Boukreev, a guide who arrived at about noon, that is, an hour before the deadline for being quite safe. The last climber

to make it to the summit arrived at 3:30 p.m., long after any safe return time. When Krakauer (client), one of the first to reach the summit, approached Hillary's step on his return, he was alarmed by lack of control and the amount of traffic on the mountainside:

"Thirty feet below, more than a dozen people were queued up at the base of the Step [ascending rather than descending] and three climbers were already in the process of hauling themselves up the rope that I was preparing to descend. I had no choice but to unclip from the line and step aside." (Krakauer, 1997:6)

Since the ascending climbers used the same ropes as the ones that the descending climbers would need, Krakauer ended up waiting for about an hour, running out of supplemental oxygen, a necessity for most prudent climbers.

7.7. About 2:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. Climbers' situation becoming precarious

By 2:30 or 3 p.m., it started to snow lightly and a mist arrived. The weather grew gradually worse with more snow and wind. One of Scott Fischer's guides (Beidleman) waited until 3:10 p.m. on the summit (more than 90 min) for their last client, Gammelgaard (client), to arrive. By then, Beidleman was worried, especially as Scott Fischer himself had not yet arrived. They began to descend, finding Fischer about 20 min from the top, still ascending. By this time, one of the descending climbers (Hill Pittman, a client who had been short-rope while ascending) soon collapsed and had to be dragged down the mountain. Meanwhile, Fischer eventually made it to the top at 3:30 pm., about the same time as Rob Hall and his client Hansen. By that time, Fischer was showing signs of cerebral edema and hypothermia. Hansen and Hall descended but Fischer was left at the summit. Later, one of the Sherpas went up to short-rope him, but this Sherpa had to leave him behind around 10 p.m. together with three other Sherpas who had arrived with the Makalu Gau, the leader of the Taiwanese team. Three Sherpas descended to get help, while one stayed with Fischer and Gau.

Table 3

Climbers, teams, team leader, role, and nationality.

Team	Team leader	Climbers	Role	Climbers' nationality
Mountain Madness	Scott Fischer		Leader	American
		Anatoli Boukreev	Guide	Russian
		Neil Beidleman	Guide	American
		Sandy Hill Pittman	Client	American
		Lene Gammelgaard	Client	Danish
		Pete Schoening	Client	American
		Beck Weathers	Client	American
		Yasuko Namba	Client	Japanese
		Beck Weathers	Client	American
Adventure Consultants	Rob Hall		Leader	New Zealand
		Andy Harris	Guide	American
		Michael Groom	Guide	Australian
		Jon Krakauer	Client	American
		Doug Hansen	Client	American
		Charlotte Fox	Client	American
		Tim Madsen	Client	American
IMAX team	David Breashears		Leader	American
South African team				
Taiwanese team	Makalu Gau		Leader	Taiwanese

At 4 p.m., Krakauer (client) met with Beck Weathers (client), who had stopped ascending after experiencing eye problems but had not yet started to descend since Hall told him to stay put. Even though Krakauer urged him to accompany them, Weathers refused, preferring to wait for Hall. The Beidleman group arriving from their descent would eventually help Weathers down the mountain slope. At 5:30 p.m., Krakauer was very close to Camp IV but the wind had picked up to hurricane level. Afraid of making a mistake in the poor visibility, Krakauer sat down to prepare himself for a short 200-yard descent. As he put it, “There were no margins for error. Worried about making a critical blunder, I sat down to marshal my energy before descending further” (Krakauer, 1997:244). Harris, one of the “Adventure Consultant” guides, passed him. While Krakauer believed that Harris had made it back, eventually it became known that he walked off the cliff and died. At roughly 4:30 p.m., Boukreev made it back to Camp IV. At 4:31 p.m., Hall reported that he and Hansen were stuck above Hillary’s Step and were in need of supplemental oxygen.

7.8. From 8 p.m. to 6:20 am. The huddle

At 8 p.m., the Beidleman group (consisting of guides Beidleman and Groom, two Sherpas, and seven clients) was left in darkness on Everest. Several of the climbers were incapacitated and could not make the effort to walk. Meanwhile, they had become lost on the shoulder. Afraid of walking off the side of the mountain, they decided to stay put in a huddle. In Camp IV, Boukreev (guide) tried unsuccessfully to rouse other worn-out climbers. Six times he tried to locate the missing climbers but each time he failed.

During the night, Beidleman was able to glimpse some stars in the sky through the clouds and the blizzard and from these get a sense of their location on the South col. of Everest. Clients Namba, Weathers, Fox, and Hill Pittman were incapacitated and could not walk. Client Madsen volunteered to wait while the guides Beidleman and Groom made a push for Camp IV with clients Schoening and Gammelgaard. On the way to the camp, they met Boukreev who eventually located the incapacitated climbers and saved Fox, Hill Pittman, and Madsen, leaving Namba and Weathers behind in the belief that they were beyond saving.

Rob Hall made a series of transmissions during the night but he was, by now, increasingly ill. At 9:30 p.m., two Sherpas from his “Adventure Consultants” ascended to save Hall and Hansen but did not succeed. Four other Sherpas from “Mountain Madness” ascended for Fischer and Gau. They found Fischer beyond saving and descended with only Gau.

7.9. 11th–12th May. Rescue attempts

At 6:20 the following morning, a phone call from Hall was patched through to New Zealand to his pregnant wife for a last goodbye. That same morning, the surviving climbers learned that Namba, Weathers, and Fischer were still stuck on the mountain. When the batteries for the radios failed, the South African expedition was asked for batteries but they refused,

referring to a future summit attempt. A search party was sent out and they soon located the clients Namba and Weathers who were both breathing but their faces were covered by several centimeters of ice. Rather than risking the entire group during the descent, the difficult decision was taken to leave Namba and Weathers. The search party returned at 8:30 a.m. At 4:30 p.m., Weathers, however, later miraculously staggered back to Camp IV. He was put in a tent that collapsed overnight. Meanwhile, the IMAX team and other teams at base camp started to climb toward higher camps in order to aid the rescue of the remains of the expeditions.

On the 12th of May, Weathers and Gau (expedition leader) were brought down to Camp II where a helicopter rescue attempt was executed. Weathers and Gau were later flown to hospitals for treatment of severe frostbite.

8. Discussion

In this paper, the purpose was to highlight the existence of Impromptu teams and analyze their role in a temporary organization. Following previous research, we have conducted a retrospective case study, based on six eyewitness accounts of the events that unfolded on Mount Everest in 1996. In 1996, there were several expeditions present on the mountain. The independent expeditions were seen by themselves, and others, as teams in the sense that they were “a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves and who are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems [...] and who manage their relationships across organizational boundaries” (Cohen and Bailey, 1997:241). In much of the literature on temporary organizations, the team is assumed to be stable over time. That is, designated team members will stay during a predetermined part of, or over the full course of the project and thus develop knowledge and experience together with others (Bechky, 2006). However, as the events unfolded in this case, the original expeditions (teams) disintegrated in response to the unexpected events. Out of the disintegration, new teams dedicated to solve the upcoming problems emerged incorporating members from other teams, as well as teams that yet had to start. Our initial observations thereby complement and contribute to the existing literature by identifying the existence and role of, what we call, “Impromptu teams” in the handling of unexpected events. Formulated differently, one might argue that Impromptu teams are emergent organizational tools for solving the unexpected.

8.1. Impromptu teams and their characteristics

“Impromptu” comes from Latin, meaning “in readiness” and connotes improvisation in the moment. We have identified and investigated the fine-grained features of three examples of Impromptu teams, which we, based on the features, have defined as *a team that is temporarily assembled on a voluntaristic basis to handle an unexpected event by an improvised self-selected initiation based on a logic of appropriateness*. The features leading up to this definition will be discussed under the next heading and represent the second contribution of the paper.

The three identified examples are “The Huddle,” “The IMAX reformation,” and “The Fischer and Gau rescue attempt” (see Table 2 and Impromptu team (IT) 2,7,5).

The first of these examples, “The Huddle,” formed a team when clients and guides alike found themselves in a pickle on the upper mountain as the weather suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, deteriorated. They soon discovered that they had to join forces in order to maximize their chances of survival, where the guide led the way and the clients and he took care of each other. Making progress from the upper mountain, the team finally stopped before reaching Camp IV as they could not see any further. In what subsequently was called the Huddle, the members of the (Impromptu) team tried to stay warm by sitting close and waiting for a break in the weather. The second example encompasses IMAX expedition that volunteered people and resources to aid in the rescue attempts after the storm. This reformed team was not obliged to do anything, nor were they tied to the other expeditions in any way, but they still volunteered resources and manpower. The third example is the rescue attempt of Fischer and Gau where Sherpas, without prior orders or obligations, joined together to try to bring them down. Battling the altitude, they finally found Gau and Fischer together, but only the former was believed to be in a surviving state and subsequently brought down and saved. Here, the sense is that the teams are formed to handle expected events and upper management is not involved in their establishment.

One of the deficiencies in the current theorizing about teams in general is a lack of attention to the underlying nature and characteristics (Kozlowski and Bell, 2003:59). Significant for the examples, drawing upon the impact of events (Weick, 1979, 1993) and the formation process, we find that one of the common denominators between the examples above is that Impromptu teams did not follow a pre-designed command structure where actions were decided on beforehand. There was no central authority deciding on who should team up with whom—rather it was a result of the situation and the sudden deviation from planned activities. It seems to be a basic organizational principle for which this case provides evidence. As suggested by other authors, the situation determines how the team is composed (Mckinney et al., 2005) and how they operate (Wildman et al., 2012). The spontaneous organization emerged as a response to the unexpected situation that the members of the teams found themselves in, and made do with whatever resources they had at hand; *The Huddle*—motivation, *The IMAX reformation*—resources and manpower, *Fischer and Gau rescue attempt*—manpower. In addition to the empirically confirmed and theoretically driven denominators (see Fig. 1) of unexpected events and self-selected team formation, two additional empirically driven denominators have been identified. These are a voluntarism-based membership, and a logic of practice based on appropriateness (c.f. March and Olsen, 2008).

In the voluntarism-based membership, the members of what became Impromptu teams decided with their free will to be a part of the team. That is, they would do and move as the team decided to do; the Huddle members would move down the mountain, and later stay together. When they later disbanded, it was due to the condition of others that could not speak for themselves. In the IMAX example, the team as a collective decided

to forego their own summit attempt to aid in the rescue, and in the Fischer and Gau rescue attempt, the Sherpas volunteered to try to save the fallen climbers.

The logic of practice based on appropriateness, which is our second denominator, is maybe best indicated by the Sherpas who considered it their task and responsibility to save, above all, Fischer. In the IMAX example, instead, both Fischer’s and Hall’s expeditions were known to the expedition members and it was considered the IMAX team’s responsibility to help out. Later, the South African team was frowned upon in media because of failure to do help out, and thus act appropriately. The Huddle example included strong and weak climbers of both expeditions and it seemed to have appeared appropriate for both guides and clients to include as many as could possibly join the team although as in for example the case of Namba, it would make them weaker—as a team. To put the practice in a nutshell, it was the right thing to do. Without voluntarism-based membership, or a logic of practice based on appropriateness, none of the presented Impromptu teams would have formed, been able to stay together, and/or solved the unexpected problems. Both denominators are thus necessities for the formation process to occur. Reflecting upon these findings, it is important to notice that Impromptu teams have very short shadows of the past and future. The teams formed without predetermined structures (shadow of the past), out of necessity as a response to the situation, and instead of acting out of expectations of continuity (shadow of the future), they emerge based on logics of appropriateness. Consequentially, Impromptu teams are by definition highly temporary, solution-oriented, and dependent of the personal traits of the individuals involved. This makes it hard for any organization to predict their emergence or establish routines for their functioning.

8.2. Toward an increased understanding of Impromptu teams

Moving beyond the identified characteristics of Impromptu teams, and instead comparing them to previous research on teams in general and teams in temporary organizations in specific, there are of course both similarities but also distinctive differences. In the background, we indicated that the way teams emerge relates to the *nature of the task* (if it is a matter of expected or unexpected events) (Weick, 1993) and *how it is initiated* (whether or not the formation self-selected or assigned). STAT teams, according to this categorization, provide examples from both the unexpected events/assigned corner e.g. Trauma teams (Faraj and Xiao, 2006) and the unexpected/self-selected e.g. the United Airlines Flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania during 9/11 (Kayes, 2003). Soon after the plane was hijacked, the passengers learned of similar hijacked planes that had been crashed into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. With this information, they seem to have concluded that they had to do something. They swiftly formed into a team and tried to enter the cockpit to take control of the plane. These passengers had not met before but they nevertheless shared a common goal and a common faith that, according to Kayes (2003), replaced the common development process and need for training, with learning processes. The learning processes allowed the team to develop a shared action plan in an attempt to efficiently

execute the goal. Hence, based on this, we suggest that some of the teams that have previously been labeled a STAT team have an Impromptu component that distinguishes them in what might be their trigger.

Further examination of Impromptu teams in relation to STAT teams (Wildman et al., 2012) shows that the non-routine part of Impromptu teams makes them somewhat similar to STAT teams in health care (Ishak and Ballard, 2012) since they are an organizational response to an unexpected event. Impromptu teams, however, differ from STAT's in that they do not respond to an order and they have a low reliance on hardware (Devine, 2002), and more fundamentally they are not designed for deployment in case of an unexpected event. Following Devine's categorization of STAT teams, Impromptu teams are also similar to medical, response, and military teams (Wildman et al., 2012) in that the physical ability needs to be high; there is a temporal duration (but not for military teams); the task structure is high (but only in medical teams); there is no active resistance (although military teams do face active resistance); and there is a high health risk. This consequently draws them closer to the grouping that developed aboard United Airlines Flight 93 (Kayes, 2003), or the malfunctioning United Airlines flight 232, where an off-duty pilot helped to land the airplane (Mckinney et al., 2005). Another difference in our findings is that the climbers, whether they are a guide or client, do not share training or experience. Climbers' ability to perform is therefore highly individual (Mckinney et al., 2005), in contrast to, for example, a pilot where professional training makes the individual replaceable and trustworthy in unexpected situations that require a swift response (Wildman et al., 2012).

Most teams, however, do not operate in contexts where people's lives are in danger, such as climbing, hijacking situations, or emergency rooms. Still, frequently seasoned mountaineers witness about how they apply the knowledge gained in the mountains to how they do business in industries ranging from construction to apparel (Useem et al., 2003). The point is that business in "normal project organizations" is governed by the same rules as the mountaineering industry (see Table 1). The consequences are, however, less delayed on the mountain, thus providing immediate feedback on the actions in comparison to "normal project organizations" with consequences in some cases emerging after years of political processes and power struggles (Cyert and March, 1963). That is, the nature of the immediate feedback creates imminent feedback loops that both in situ and in retrospect appear clearer than in other long-term settings. As for team composition, a life and death situation draws out the true character of individuals and the reasons for joining together in an effort (Hannah et al., 2009). While mountaineering expeditions thus at first sight may come across as an extraordinary type of project work, expeditions carry many lessons for "normal project organizations" far from the context of climbing (c.f. Alby and Zucchermaglio, 2006). Every project organization experiences unexpected events that the organization or existing teams are required to manage (cf. Söderholm, 2008). Some of these situations might be top-down-initiated but we would argue that often an assigned team is not only too slow but also represents a disproportionately large response to the situation. If

any of these conditions apply, we would argue that the Impromptu team is triggered.

8.3. *Limitations and suggestions for future research*

The analyzed case does obviously not represent an environment most organizations will ever face, but as recognized by the vast literature on non-traditional environments, and mountaineering specifically, the immediate feedback upon activities allow for a unique opportunity for understanding processes in "traditional project organizations." While the greatest limitation is the reliance on published retrospective accounts (Elmes and Frame, 2008), a consequence of the inaccessibility of the environment and the elusive emergence of Impromptu teams, the case study mirrors other case studies in its use of data sources and cross-validation through multiple sources (e.g. Weick, 1993; Vaughan, 1996). Finally, we are interested in the existence and nature of Impromptu teams, rather than whether the detailed accounts of who is to blame for certain actions are less relevant. That said, this paper, relying as it does on a single case in a less traditional setting, implies that there is a need to elaborate on the nature of Impromptu teams and the reason they form in more traditional project industries, too. Another possible avenue for further research is to examine the response practices in detail. Following earlier contributions to responses to unexpected events (i.e. Gernaldi et al. 2010; Söderholm, 2008), detailed accounts of the activities would shed further light on strategic practices for dealing with the situations they were confronted with, and the possible role of the past and the future in such dealings. A third possible avenue for further research is to focus on the drivers for Impromptu formation. In all the three given examples, it was, for example, the guides and Sherpas performing according to the rules of their predefined role in spite of the threat to their own lives, without formal coordination. Rule-based behavior could be considered a top-down process but the rules were not intended for team formation. People external to the temporary organization have not accepted the rules beforehand and therefore they operate under another logic—the logic of appropriateness (c.f. March & Olsen, 2008). Such teams are triggered by "given this situation, I ought to do this." Embedded in a social collectivity, expectations therefore act as a planning mechanism of their own, or more specifically, any person would ask, "What kind of a situation is this? What kind of a person am I? What does a person such as I do in a situation such as this?" (March 1994) For example, our second example, the IMAX reformation, did not have any obligation to come to the aid of the troubled expeditions. In fact, doing so endangered their own expedition in that it used up valuable energy and supplies. They helped because of moral obligations, in contrast to those in the South African expedition present on the mountain, which did not help. This allows teams to define the means of action on their own. It is more an acceptance of how something ought to be done rather than a predefined action pattern that determines what should happen. Lastly, since these teams formed out of unexpected events, research could give more attention both to intended team formations and unintended team formations. In the case of the latter, it is the unexpected event that becomes the trigger and needs extra scrutiny.

8.4. Practical implications

Based on our findings, we suggest that there are insights that managers might want to consider. First, temporary organizations facing unexpected events need to be able to form new teams in response to the requirements of the situation. Some of these teams may be intentional, such as formally sanctioning of Cheetah and STAT teams, while others will be unintentional and form out of a situational necessity. Either way, studying these teams and their formation suggests that expertise and knowledge involve far more than the application of plans and methods. Being able to form effective project teams in some situations requires rethinking and questioning, abilities that any project manager should value. Second, the likelihood of successfully forming a team is influenced by what is considered the appropriate activity in any given situation. At the same time, they are a crucial coping mechanism in any organization. Hence, fostering and nurturing a supportive and autonomous culture by rewarding team formation seem useful to address unexpected events efficiently.

9. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the existence of Impromptu teams and analyze their role in a temporary organization. Based on a retrospective study of how a series of unexpected events on the 1996 Everest expedition led not only to disaster but also to the formation of a number of Impromptu teams, we have both illustrated and analyzed the existence of Impromptu teams as they emerge in a temporary organization. Based on the case and through the analysis, we have made three contributions. The first contribution is the identification and definition of Impromptu team, illustrated by the three examples with the rather straightforward common denominators of being initiated by a sudden unexpected event and self-selected team membership. With unexpected events in this context implying an event that is manageable neither by the individual nor by previously formed groupings. Also, we inductively identified that the teams were driven by voluntarism-based membership and a logic of practice based on appropriateness, which we argue are two central necessary denominators for Impromptu teams to function as an emergent organizational tool to solve an unexpected event. Impromptu teams are, based on this definition, teams that are temporarily assembled on a voluntaristic basis to handle an unexpected event by an improvised self-selected initiation based on a logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen, 2008). By that, the paper contributes with broadening the understanding of project team types by adding a previously un-described but clearly important type. The second contribution is that previous research has not paid adequate attention to the situatedness in which the team is formed (Kozlowski and Bell, 2003:59). We have shown that the lack of situatedness has contributed to a view of team formation and management of unexpected events that relate to predetermined assumptions and structures within organizations and research thereof. Still, spontaneous team formations are most likely a common coping strategy in most organizations. An increased attention to the situatedness thus offers means of explaining the role of Impromptu

teams in organizations. Our third and last contribution relates to the context where we, contrary to more traditional project contexts (such as construction, engineering, and product development), have paid attention to non-traditional industries (such as climbing expeditions). This has allowed us to show that temporary organizations may be formed in all kinds of settings, where the mechanisms (in this case the solution–orientation, but also features such as temporariness, resources, etc.) are common themes across contexts. By offering an alternative mirror to which traditional contexts can be juxtaposed, we can compare, confirm, and/or refute findings where theory is supposed to hold true over a range instances.

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