

INSTRUCTOR GUIDE

INSTRUCTOR GUIDE | SUGGESTED RESPONSES

Four teams, two very different weeks

A guide to diagnosing switching, coreness, familiarity, and team count.

Purpose of the case

The case helps students and practitioners move beyond team count as the default way to diagnose multiple team membership. Ruben and Aisha both belong to four teams, yet their time is organised very differently. The useful question is not simply whether four is too many. Participants need to examine what happens during the working week.

SUGGESTED FORMAT

Allow 30 to 40 minutes. The case works with undergraduate students, master's students, supervisors, project leaders, and HR professionals. No prior knowledge of multiple team membership is required.

Learning objectives

- Distinguish team count from switching between team contexts.
- Recognise the difference between a clear core membership and several equally demanding memberships.
- Explain why familiarity may support a core-and-peripheral arrangement without making frequent switching harmless.
- Design a practical intervention that changes the work instead of placing responsibility solely on the employee.
- Separate an evidence-informed recommendation from a causal claim.

The central diagnosis

Ruben and Aisha should not receive the same intervention merely because both belong to four teams.

Ruben has a clear home team. Most of his working time remains with Outbound, and his additional contributions are placed in bounded blocks. He also knows many of the people with whom he works. His schedule contains some switching, but it does not show the same fragmentation as Aisha's schedule. Nothing in the case proves that Ruben is thriving, so students should still ask him. The team count alone provides no good reason to remove one of his memberships.

Aisha has no agreed core team. Her time is distributed evenly across four memberships, and she changes team context repeatedly throughout the week. Each team also expects access to her outside its scheduled blocks. Her roster therefore understates the switching she experiences. Her own report of fatigue and unfinished work gives Eva a direct reason to intervene, even though the case does not show that multiple team membership caused those experiences.

Lower familiarity adds another difficulty. Aisha must repeatedly work out who does what and how each group handles its work. The underlying study does not show that familiarity protects employees from the consequences of frequent switching. Familiarity was relevant to the benefits associated with a clear core team. It should be treated as part of a workable portfolio, not as permission to leave a fragmented roster unchanged.

Recommended first response

CHOOSE OPTION C

Keep Aisha's development interests in view while redesigning how the four memberships make claims on her time.

One workable first roster is shown below.

Day	Team allocation
Monday	Returns, 8 hours
Tuesday	Returns, 8 hours
Wednesday	Scanner Pilot, 8 hours
Thursday	Returns, 4 hours; Inventory Accuracy, 4 hours
Friday	Customer Recovery, 4 hours; Returns, 4 hours

This roster makes Returns the clear core team, with 24 of Aisha's 40 hours. Scanner Pilot remains a meaningful development opportunity. Inventory Accuracy and Customer Recovery receive fixed blocks. The team count remains four, but the number of within-day changes falls considerably.

The roster only works if the team leaders change their expectations. During a Scanner Pilot block, Aisha should not be treated as continuously available to Returns. During a Returns day, minor Scanner Pilot questions should wait. Each peripheral team needs another contact for routine issues and a clear definition of what qualifies as urgent.

Eva should also give the peripheral assignments an end point. For example, the four-team arrangement could run for eight weeks before the team leads decide whether Aisha's contribution is still needed. A small side assignment easily becomes a permanent source of interruption when nobody identifies an end point.

When reducing the number of teams is appropriate

Keeping four memberships is not an objective in itself. Eva should pause or remove one assignment if the team leaders cannot group the work into blocks, if all four teams genuinely require daily availability, or if Aisha continues to report serious difficulty after the roster has been redesigned.

Inventory Accuracy is the easiest membership to transfer because its supervisor has already identified another employee who could take over after a handover. Scanner Pilot should not automatically be removed because it is connected to Aisha's development goals. Removing the work she values while leaving fragmented routine work in place would solve the manager's scheduling problem at Aisha's expense.

A three-team rule may be useful as a prompt for review, but it is weak as a general decision rule. In the published study, team number, switching, and coreness described different aspects of the arrangement. Once switching and coreness were considered, team number no longer predicted emotional exhaustion in the reported models.

Why complete scheduling autonomy is insufficient

Giving Aisha more voice is sensible. Giving her sole responsibility for resolving four competing team demands is not.

In the underlying study, scheduling autonomy was unexpectedly associated with more switching and less coreness. The finding was observational and should not be interpreted as proof that autonomy is harmful. It does show why "let the employee sort it out" is not a sufficient solution. Aisha cannot create protected blocks if four team leaders continue to expect immediate access to her.

The better response is constrained choice. Eva and Aisha can design the blocks together, while Eva negotiates and enforces the boundaries with the team leaders.

Suggested opening for Eva

CONVERSATION OPENER

"I do not think the problem is that you are involved in four teams. The problem I see is that your week is divided into small pieces, and every team still expects access to you between those pieces. I would like Returns to be your home team for the next eight weeks and keep the Scanner Pilot as a protected development block, but I want to design the arrangement with you."

What Eva should monitor

Eva should begin with a small set of measures that can be discussed with Aisha rather than turning the intervention into surveillance.

One useful measure is the number of actual team-context changes during the week, including unscheduled interruptions. A second is whether Aisha can complete the work planned for each block without carrying unfinished tasks into the next one. Eva should also ask Aisha for a short weekly assessment of her energy and ability to focus.

Operational measures may include delayed returns, unresolved inventory cases, or errors caused by incomplete handovers. These measures should be interpreted alongside Aisha's experience. A faster process would not count as a successful redesign if the same fragmentation simply became less visible.

The first review can take place after two weeks, followed by a fuller decision after six or eight weeks.

Suggested responses: questions 1 to 4

1. Why does the number four hide more than it reveals?

Ruben concentrates most of his time in one team and handles other memberships in bounded periods. Aisha distributes her time evenly and moves repeatedly between four active contexts. Formal membership count captures neither difference.

2. What is the most pressing problem?

Aisha's week is fragmented, and the formal roster does not protect her from interruptions between blocks. The lack of a shared priority order makes every team's request appear equally urgent.

3. Should Aisha leave one team?

Possibly, but team removal should follow an attempt to clarify priorities and group work. Participants should ask whether each team truly needs Aisha, whether daily access is necessary, whether responsibilities can be transferred, and which assignment matters to her development.

4. What should become the core team?

Returns is the most defensible core because it uses Aisha's established expertise and already receives the largest single share of her current attention. Another choice is acceptable when the response explains the operational reason and preserves a real development opportunity.

Suggested responses: questions 5 to 8

5. How should Eva handle demands outside the blocks?

Each team needs a backup contact and an agreed definition of urgency. Routine requests wait until Aisha's next block. Eva, rather than Aisha alone, must defend this arrangement.

6. What should Eva say?

A strong opening describes the fragmented week, invites Aisha into the redesign, and avoids treating four memberships as evidence that she has made a poor choice.

7. What counts as improvement?

Fewer unplanned switches, more completed work within blocks, clearer ownership, and a better experience for Aisha. Participants should avoid claiming success from a single measure.

8. Does Ruben need the same intervention?

The case gives no direct reason to redesign Ruben's work. Eva should still check his experience because a neat roster can hide interruptions or other demands.

Research evidence for the debrief

The published study found a positive association between switching and emotional exhaustion while holding team count constant. Switching also had a positive indirect association with later turnover through emotional exhaustion.

Coreness did not have an unconditional main effect on exhaustion. It was associated with lower emotional exhaustion when employees had relatively high prior familiarity with members across their teams. Familiarity did not weaken the switching-exhaustion relationship.

These findings support the distinction used in the case. They do not establish that the fictional roster would cause exhaustion, nor do they establish a universal maximum number of teams.

Evidence boundaries

The original sample consisted of employees in a large research organisation. The Haven Foods setting broadens the classroom discussion, but it does not broaden the empirical sample. Participants should treat the case as an opportunity to test the usefulness of the concepts in another setting.

The study was observational. Weekly work records also provide a conservative view of switching because employees can move between teams several times within a day. The case makes within-day changes visible for teaching purposes, but those fictional schedule details are not reported study data.

Suggested class sequence

1. Ask participants to vote on Options A through D before introducing the research.
2. Have pairs mark every team-context change in each roster.
3. Ask the class to identify Ruben's and Aisha's core teams.
4. Let groups redesign Aisha's week while keeping all four memberships initially.
5. Introduce the findings on switching, coreness, familiarity, and exhaustion.
6. Revisit the first vote and ask what changed.
7. Close by asking when reducing the number of teams would still be the right decision.

Short assessment rubric

A strong response:

- Diagnoses the arrangement using switching and coreness rather than team count alone.
- Treats familiarity accurately and does not claim that it removes switching costs.
- Produces a workable roster with protected blocks and clear ownership.
- Includes Aisha's development goals and voice.
- Names a fallback if team demands cannot be grouped.
- Acknowledges that the research informs the recommendation without proving causality.

RESEARCH BASIS

The published study followed 1,345 employees involved in 4,329 project teams and combined detailed weekly work-hour records with surveys, project records, HR records, and later turnover.

Van de Brake, Van der Vegt, and Essens (2024). "More Than Just a Number." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 109(5), 714–729.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001168>

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