

1

What Is Teamwork?

What comes to mind when you hear the word “teamwork”? Most likely an assortment of thoughts comes to mind, including positive ones such as working together, achieving common goals, and having fun. On the other hand, negative thoughts may come to mind, too, such as personality conflicts, difficult communication, and time-consuming meetings.

Throughout your life you have been a member of many teams: athletic teams such as baseball or tennis; volunteer teams such as fund raising or fire fighting; school teams such as debate or chorus; social teams such as card clubs; or civic teams such as city-wide support groups. You are a member of a family—and that is a team also. Plus, you are on a variety of teams at work. Some of these groups of people are true teams. But are they all?

WHAT IS A TEAM?

A team is a group of people who are mutually dependent on one another to achieve a common goal. Some definitions of a team require that the group must also be functioning well together. Although “functioning well” is not a part of our definition, it is definitely a part of our purpose as trainers and consultants. This book of team-building tools will assist you to improve how well any team functions.

“A team is a group of people who are mutually dependent on one another to achieve a common goal.”

Exhibit 1. Twelve Advantages of Working in Teams

1. More input leads to better ideas and decisions.
2. Higher quality output.
3. Involvement of everyone in the process.
4. Increased ownership and buy-in by members.
5. Higher likelihood of implementation of new ideas.
6. Widens the circle of communication.
7. Shared information means increased learning.
8. Increased understanding of other people's perspectives.
9. Increased opportunity to draw on individual strengths.
10. Ability to compensate for individual weaknesses.
11. Provides a sense of security.
12. Develops personal relationships.

ADVANTAGES OF WORKING IN TEAMS

Exhibit 1 provides a dozen advantages of working in teams. These are described in more detail below.

The Results

Probably the key advantage of teamwork is a better end result. Organizations find that teams can be more responsive to the changing needs of the marketplace. Teams can be closer to the customer's needs, more informed about advanced technology, and faster to respond than traditional hierarchies.

A team working together has more and better input than individuals working alone. If everyone who works in the process is involved, it is less likely that steps will be missed. This results in *better ideas and decisions* and *higher quality output*.

How the Job Gets Done

Ever had a great idea that just didn't fly? Often the reason is a lack of buy-in from others in the organization. Teamwork requires the *involvement of everyone*, which means *increased ownership* and a *higher likelihood of implementation of new ideas*.

Improved Communication

The basis for almost any problem in any organization is usually communication. Good teamwork can *widen the circle of communication*. Teamwork goes a step beyond, however, and helps people understand each other's jobs and roles in the organization. This leads to an appreciation for colleagues and a desire to help make their jobs easier.

More Learning

The simple fact that people talk to one another in teams means that their *shared information means increased learning*. This sharing also *increases understanding of other people's perspectives* and provides the team with the *opportunity to draw on individual strengths* and to *compensate for individual weaknesses* in a positive way. Team members learn from each other.

Personal Satisfaction

Team members generally report a sense of personal satisfaction. A team may *provide a sense of security* that allows individuals to take risks and make decisions that they would not make if they were working alone. This generally leads to growth for the organization as well as the individual.

Because most of us spend about 25 percent of our lives at work, it should be a pleasant experience. Teamwork can lead the way to making work pleasurable by helping to *develop personal relationships*. In fact, you should not feel as if you are getting up to go to work, but instead that you are getting up to go to play each day!

“ . . . you should not feel as if you are getting up to go to work, but instead that you are getting up to go to play each day!”

DISADVANTAGES OF WORKING IN TEAMS

Exhibit 2 provides a dozen disadvantages of working in teams. These are described in some detail in the following text.

Time

The biggest disadvantage of teamwork is that it *requires more time*. This is especially true when a team is in the start-up mode, which *can lead to many*

Exhibit 2. Twelve Disadvantages of Working in Teams

1. Requires more time.
2. Can lead to many meetings.
3. Often difficult to schedule mutual time.
4. Requires individuals to give more of themselves.
5. May take longer to make a decision.
6. May be used as an excuse for a lack of individual performance.
7. Personality conflicts are magnified.
8. Disagreements can cause strained relationships.
9. Potential for subgroups to form.
10. Teams can become exclusive rather than inclusive.
11. May lead to unclear roles.
12. "Group think" can limit innovation.

meetings. There will always be a concern about "too many meetings," but the team can be aware of this and ensure that all meetings they do hold are necessary for productivity and efficiency.

It will also always be *difficult to schedule mutual time* for meetings or collaborative work time and people may feel they are required to *give more of themselves.* And during these meetings, it will *take longer to make decisions* than if one person had made the decision.

The positive side is that this will get better over time. The team will eventually see a payoff. Problems that once took huge chunks of time will disappear. Communication gaps that required additional time to fill in will be gone. Processes that required much rework will be done right the first time.

Individual Performance

Individual performance may suffer initially. As we said above, teamwork requires that individuals give more of themselves to the team. This is difficult to do for anyone who has been a loner in the organization or who has not been dependent on others to get the job done. It requires new and different interpersonal skills.

Individuals may use the team as *an excuse for a lack of performance.* This will eventually be recognized. If your team is just forming, it may take some time before you discover the non-performance, and the problem may turn out to be due to a need for role clarification.

Conflict

When individuals are required to work together, *personality conflicts are magnified*. This will lead to *disagreements*, which *can cause strained relationships*. Expect that some of your team members will be very disturbed by this.

Inherent Disadvantages

As positive as working together may seem, groups bring with them their own unique set of drawbacks. There is always the *potential for subgroups to form* and split the team. Teams can become too strong and *become exclusive, rather than inclusive*—forgetting to include new members, to ask for temporary support, or to communicate with customers or suppliers. People may have *unclear roles* to play and not be as productive as they could be.

And finally, a phenomenon called “*group think*” can limit innovation. Group think generally occurs when a team has been very successful and begins to believe that it will never fail. The team begins to do things on the suggestion of a single member, without question. Unfortunately, you won’t know that group think is occurring until a disaster occurs. The best-known historical situation was the Bay of Pigs.

With all these drawbacks, should we forget about teamwork? Of course not! Teamwork is still worth it. Teamwork is important. However, teams must be made aware of the potential drawbacks, and team building can help a team move forward. What can you do about the disadvantages identified above? The following quick thoughts give some ways that will help you to prevent and remedy potential team issues.

- If *time* is an issue, discuss it. Sometimes being aware of a problem will keep everyone focused on making it better. Sometimes reminding team members of time that was saved by solving a problem is necessary.
- If *individual performance* suffers initially, the team will often take care of the issue as a team. If not, the team leader may need to discuss the issue with the individual.
- If *conflict* is the issue, it needs to be addressed head on. Members must see that conflict can be an important and positive part of teamwork. The team will have to develop a plan to manage conflict. If it is too serious, a team-building intervention may be necessary.
- If *group dynamics* is an issue, training may often be the solution.

You can see that there is much to learn about being a good team player and that there is much you can do to improve teamwork.

Exhibit 3. Teamwork: What Do You Think?

Instructions: Read each statement once. Check whether you think the statement is true or false.

True False

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1. A team needs a strong leader, even if the leader intimidates some team members. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2. The team should meet only if all members are able to attend. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3. There are often times when individual team members must do what they think is right, even if it conflicts with a team decision. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4. Consensus decisions generally take too much time and result in a watered-down decision. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5. It is healthy for several team members to talk at the same time; it shows team energy and enthusiasm. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6. Teams should take time up front to establish clear roles for each member. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 7. It is difficult for a team to succeed when it does not have clear goals. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 8. Teams are more successful when they are able to avoid conflict. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 9. A team should set aside meeting time to explore member feelings and relationships. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 10. The team should not actively try to get quiet members to participate. They will participate when they have something to contribute. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 11. In truly effective teams, members have a personal liking for one another. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | 12. Once a team gets an established way of working, it is unproductive to spend time changing it. |

Copyright © 1999 ebb associates inc

EXPLORE YOUR TEAMWORK ASSUMPTIONS

We all make assumptions about almost everything. Are you aware of the assumptions that form the basis of your teamwork philosophy? Complete the quiz in Exhibit 3 to identify the assumptions you hold and to see some other ways to view the issues that surround teamwork.

One of the greatest difficulties about trying to improve teamwork is that there are few black-and-white answers, but many shades of gray.

What are the answers to the true/false statements in Exhibit 3? The answer to all of those questions is “It depends!” So if you were absolutely certain about your own answer, you might want to step back and think about other possibilities. That nebulous “It depends” makes teamwork difficult, but it also tests the members’ ability to see things from another vantage point. As we said, there are few pat answers in teamwork.

Let’s take a look at those “It depends” answers.

Question 1. Of course team leaders should not intimidate team members! Yet, as wrong as that may sound, there is another side. Have you ever met someone who was intimidated by everyone—especially if he or she had the title “leader”? Easily intimidated people need to learn to become more comfortable with speaking up.

The second word in this statement that can be interpreted in many ways is “strong.” The definition of “strong” depends on one’s background and experience. Some people see “strong” as a very positive attribute for a leader, for example, someone who seems to be able to handle any problem with ease or who shares the recognition but accepts most of the responsibility when things go wrong. Some people see “strong” as a negative quality, for example, someone who takes over when the team should do something themselves. A team needs the first “strong” leader, not the second.

Question 2. This is a tricky one. Lots of questions come to mind. How often does the team meet? What is the purpose of the meeting? Will the team make a critical decision? Why is someone missing? If the purpose of the meeting is to make an important decision, the team must consider whether the decision needs to be made now, whether they know the missing member’s opinion, and whether the decision will affect the missing member.

No, you can’t wait until everyone is there to have every meeting. You may never meet! However, you must think ahead to what will occur at the meeting and how it will affect missing team members before deciding whether to meet or not. You must also think about how to communicate what happened to team members who were missing. One excellent communication method is for someone who is present to relay the information to the missing person. The team should ask for a volunteer to do this as the meeting starts. That way the individual will know to take more detailed notes and to give full attention to discussions of particular interest to the missing person.

Question 3. At first glance, you would probably say “False!” Of course team members can’t do what they want when it is in conflict with a team decision. If team members can do that, you don’t have a team at all!

But, what about the times when the individual team member is correct, but just unable to convince the rest of the team? What if the team is making a decision that is unethical, illegal, or unsafe? Should the single team member sacrifice personal values? These are difficult questions, and they are a great example of how difficult teamwork can be.

Question 4. Consensus decisions are always the best. Right? Wrong! Reaching a decision by consensus can lead to a watered-down decision. But even a watered-down decision with 100 percent support is better than a perfect decision (if there is such a thing) with no support.

“But even a watered down decision with 100 percent support is better than a perfect decision . . . with no support.”

Reaching a consensus does take time, therefore, any team should choose with care which decisions require a consensus. By the way, reaching consensus does become easier with time and practice.

Question 5. Wow! Isn’t that a loaded statement? Of course, lots of people talking at the same time can show energy and enthusiasm. But what about the times when five people on the team feel enthusiastic and the sixth person feels trampled? Is that the makeup of a healthy team?

The one-person-speaking-at-a-time rule has a lot of practical, common sense behind it. How can you hear information being shared by one person if you are listening to another? Can good decisions be made if everyone hasn’t heard the same thing? And what does this mean for communication outside the team?

Once again, it depends. Everyone talking does show excitement in the team, but there are drawbacks. Timing is crucial. Is everyone listening when they should be? Are the right people talking when they should be? Are the right people listening when they should be? The answers to these questions will guide what should be happening.

Question 6. Establishing clear roles for all team members may take a lot of time. Aren’t there other more important things to do up front? Aren’t there problems to solve? The team has real work to do, and es-

Establishing roles doesn't seem that important. Besides, don't all people know what their jobs are? All of this is true, yet there is another side.

Establishing roles up front guarantees that everyone has a clearly identified job. It prevents the same task from being done twice, some tasks not being done at all, and other tasks being redone because they weren't done right the first time.

Establishing roles early in a team's existence is well-invested time. It keeps things organized. And although the team should spend time in discussion early, roles evolve over time. Team members, as well as the leader, must pay attention to this.

By the way, most teams assign roles such as recorder, time keeper, facilitator, advisor, or process coach. All of these are important functional roles for the team, and most team members will know their "job-related" roles. A team should also consider the natural roles people bring to the team. Some are good organizers, some are creative, and some are good conflict managers. The team should be aware of these natural attributes and utilize them to contribute to the effort.

Question 7. Generally, it is true that a team must have clear goals. But what about the team that is still figuring out what it is supposed to be doing? What about the team whose goal is continually changing? What about the troubleshooting team? Each of these is a special case and, although their goals change quickly—monthly, daily, or perhaps even hourly—they will most likely have goals for a shorter time period.

It may also be that establishing a goal defines the limitations of a team and may inhibit the team members from accomplishing as much as they can because the team quits when it reaches the stated goal. Also, some unique individuals feel constrained by goals.

A team will most often succeed more easily if everyone on the team knows the goal and is working toward it. In most teams, people are heading in the same *general* direction, but may not be heading in the same *specific* direction. That is, they are all heading west, but are taking a different routes. This might cause some to end up in San Diego, some in Seattle, and others in Denver.

Teams should try to clarify their goals as specifically as possible to prevent rework, different outcomes, falling short of potential, and inefficient use of time. By the way, goals are most efficient if the organization's goals, the team's goals, and the individual's goals are all aligned.

Question 8. Avoiding conflict would be great! It keeps things clean and neat. No frustration! No messy communication. No arguments. All

of this is great—if there truly are no disagreements on the team. This is rarely true.

Even on the team on which everyone gets along, there are differences of opinion. If a team claims not to have any conflict, they have probably learned to manage it well. And instead of calling it “conflict,” they consider it “good discussion.” This may be seen as “avoiding conflict.”

In the statement, however, if we consider the word “avoid,” defined in the dictionary as “steering away from,” the team could be missing many opportunities. Avoiding conflict may mean sweeping issues under the rug and not dealing with them head on. This could lead to a major explosion at a later time. It could also lead to mediocre outcomes.

Conflict, when managed well, opens the team to many possibilities. Conflict often leads to a great solution, a new idea, and satisfaction for everyone on the team.

***“Conflict, when managed well
opens the team to many possibilities.”***

In conclusion, conflict usually leads to a team that has more successes. Often, a team that believes it has no conflict is probably doing a great job of managing its conflict.

Question 9. Teams have lots to do and meetings generally take too long anyway, so it would seem inefficient to take valuable meeting time to explore member feelings and relationships. Besides, shouldn’t all this touchy-feely stuff take place outside of meeting time? All of this is true, and you can make a very strong case for it.

On the other hand, value is added by discussing relationships within the team. First, the individuals involved usually build a stronger relationship. Second, others around usually learn something from the discussion. Third, the team benefits, because smoothing out the relationship will smooth out the teamwork. If a difficult relationship has been improved, less inappropriate time will be dedicated to it. In addition, the improved relationship will lead to better communication and support. This increases the effectiveness of the entire team.

Question 10. There is, of course, something to be said for allowing quiet members to speak up when they feel comfortable. If pushed for comments, some individuals may be intimidated or feel “put on the

spot.” We could also assume that most people’s responses will be best when they feel ready to offer a suggestion. In fact, sometimes they may have a problem that is no one’s business.

Yet, there is another way to think about it. It is every team member’s responsibility to help balance discussion and ensure that everyone is contributing. That means individuals should monitor themselves and speak up when it is important to voice their opinions.

At times, team members may need to force themselves out of their comfort zones in order to be good team players. And at other times, team members may need a push to contribute. All team members must do their part and participate as needed—even if it is uncomfortable at times.

“At times, team members may need to force themselves out of their comfort zones in order to be good team players.”

Question 11. Wouldn’t it be great if every member of a team liked every other member? In this case, it depends on how you define the word “like.” Does “like” mean that you would want to invite the person to dinner or take a vacation with him or her? Or does “like” mean that you get along well with the person at work and you respect his or her expertise?

People do not need to have a relationship outside of the workplace to be members of a good team. They do, however, need to respect one another. They also need to appreciate the diversity that each person brings to the team. They need to recognize that just because someone is different, it isn’t wrong. The team needs those differences.

Question 12. It makes a lot of sense to get something up and running smoothly and to try to maintain it. It is simply more efficient when you don’t continue to change things. Fewer changes means fewer communication mishaps.

Today there is another way to look at the topic of change. Some even say, “If it isn’t broken, break it!” That just means that no matter how well things are working presently, there is always a better way. This is known as continuous process improvement.

Note: The activity in Exhibit 3 is useful to conduct with a team. Have everyone on the team complete the statements and then try to reach a unanimous decision as to whether each statement is true or false. A great deal of learning will occur through the discussion.

The team will need to make a call on this one. It can do that by exploring several questions, such as: What effect will change have? Do the benefits outweigh the problems? How much time will it take to make the change? Will we be more productive if we change? Does this productivity outweigh the time spent in making the change? Even if we know the change would cause more problems and decrease productivity a bit, is it necessary to ensure a competitive edge?

So there it is. Any of the statements could be true, or they could be false. It depends. Many things in teamwork are the same. It depends.

I hope this exercise was a thought-provoking one and that it has set you up for more learning throughout this book.

Teamwork is not natural for most of us. Why is that? Most of us were brought up to do the best we could as individuals. Even now, you are most likely rewarded according to how much you accomplish as an individual, not as a good team member. Have you ever been rewarded for helping someone else, even though it meant that you didn't accomplish your goals? It takes some new thinking. And it takes some new skills—or at least some concentration on skills that you may have but don't always use.

“Teamwork is not natural for most of us.”
