

Workplace Teamwork

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Teamwork Basics

Of all the challenging aspects of the workplace, effective teamwork may be the most trying. If you've have a bad experience with a customer, it's typically over as soon as she or he exits the door or hangs up the phone. Yet bad team relations are here to stay. On the other hand, a smooth running, well-coordinated team will help ensure your department is productive, and your work day is much more enjoyable.

The teamwork dynamic will likely feel familiar. You have been working with teams your whole life: from your family *team members* of parents and siblings, to schoolyard game teams, to the teamwork of simply driving a freeway or walking your way through a crowd without bumping into your co-travelers.

Teams may be comprised of those who work beneath you, professional equals at your side, or those above you in the workplace structure. Some teams may work under strict definitions of roles and duties; others may be loose assemblies of people who join together for an assigned task, then depart their own ways to form new team combinations.

Even if you work alone with just yourself, you still have to coordinate the complex aspects of your own personality and aptitudes. Maybe some projects you do best in the morning, or others you handle better when motivated by deadline pressure. You assign yourself tasks according to the strengths and weaknesses of your own abilities. The dynamic of a well-functioning team are the same.

Team Composition & Tactics

Whatever the nature of your team—whether it's an effort of just two workers, or eight players on a sports team, or thousands of coordinated employees interacting under a complex corporate structure—certain tactics may help you be most productive as a unified team, along with your own part as a team member.

There are three primary components of effective teamwork: the common vision and mission shared among all team members; the complementary skills of each team member; and interpersonal bonds that tie it all together. Let's consider how those components interact.

A common vision requires strong leadership providing a direction for the organization and your team to follow—a guiding principle or a mission statement. Before you can have cohesion as a team, there must be clearly defined duties, interim mileposts to aim for, and expected end goals for the team to fulfill. There's old saying that where there is no vision, the people perish. This is as true for teams, companies and other organizations, as it is for entire civilizations.

The best functioning team may be comprised of a diverse group of people, providing different but complementary skills to the group effort. It may not be immediately clear to each other what those specific skills and characteristics might be, but you can trust that your experienced supervisors and company managers had their reasons for assembling the particular team you're on. You may quickly notice that each person on your team brings something unique to the group, every member providing assets (as well as flaws) to be appreciated and accommodated. Remember the strength of the group does not necessarily come from your similarities, but the combined contribution of each member's differences.

An effective team should bond together in common support of the company's vision and mission. This is an ongoing process, as the team comes to appreciate one another's abilities, their loyalties and commitment to one another's success as individuals and the group as a whole. As with any well-functioning relationship, the team is also able to examine itself, address and resolve issues, without turning inward and self-destructing. For the full benefits of team dynamics, creativity and differing opinions are not only valuable, but essential. It is the role of a team leader or supervisor to ensure the team effort remains coordinated and productive, and that proper procedures are followed to keep the team efforts on track.

Team Conflicts & Resolutions

Team builders have long recognized the dynamics of teamwork evolution, including psychologist Bruce Tuckman's processes of *forming*, *storming*, and *norming*. During the *forming phase*, teams are assembled; they take inventory of their collective skill base, and define the direction the team should take. The *storming phase* is where territories are staked, conflicting personalities are observed, and differing visions are argued. The *norming phase* is where the team details are agreed upon, and a group norm is established.

Sometimes you may find yourself with a team member (or members) who don't pull their weight, who take credit for the work of others, or—the very worse of all—work to undermine the efforts of others to draw attention away from their own poor performance. Your supervisors should typically know who is a good team member, and who is not so good. You will likely be assessed by how well you get along with the troublesome workers, as well as the best ones. If you can show yourself to be team player who tries to help *everyone* do better, even the ones who aren't so good—you may be recognized for it, and you might even be promoted to leadership position for your extra efforts, and perhaps rise up in to a management position, if that's your goal.

If all these team development phases and conflicts are worked out well, and any difficult team members are handled with care, the team then moves into a *performing mode*, where its mission is carried out for the good of each team member, the team as a whole, and the organization they serve

Summary:

- Working well on an effective team may be one the most challenging aspects at a workplace.
- The three primary components of an effective team are a common vision, complementary skills of the team members, and bonding that holds the team together.
- A diversity of skills and perspectives among team members helps create a dynamic team.
- A standard process in team development includes forming, storming and norming.
- If you can work for the best interests of the team, and help to resolve team problems and conflicts, you may be recognized and rewarded for your efforts.