

17

Teamwork



Technique sheet

Problem-based learning resources

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Introduction

In a race, a group of people all do the same thing at the same time but only one can win – the person who comes first. If two rugby teams play each other the team wins or loses – and the best player on the pitch can be on the losing side! In groups, individuals win and lose. In teams only the team can win or lose.

What is so special about teams?

Teams are more powerful than individuals or groups because the members can support each other by ensuring people with the relevant skills and knowledge do particular jobs, or by just offering encouragement. They can often cover temporary absences if necessary and ensure that more than one person knows what the job needs – very useful if the manager is off sick for a week! Successful teams also tend to perform much better than the sum of the individual people – the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

- Make sure you use team members' strengths when you work with them – it's a collaboration not a competition.

So why don't we always work in teams?

Some jobs are solitary (e.g. changing a fuse or other simple maintenance tasks) and some

jobs are better done without 'help' – too many cooks all with their own ideas really can spoil the broth! Running teams is also more complicated than simply working alone. Teams need more communication and management than simple groups and sometimes team members are chosen because they have particular technical skills and they don't immediately get on with, or understand, each other! Why have lots of electrical specialists if the job the team needs to do involves electrics, building, design and liaison with the client? These different perspectives and skills can lead to tension – but as a team develops these differences become strengths not weaknesses.

- Make sure the job needs a team approach – it might be simpler to just do it yourself but, if it needs a team, leave time and space to develop the team.

Do teams need a team leader?

People often imagine a team needs a team leader and expect this to be a single person who is in charge. In fact, successful teams need leadership, but this can be shared with the relevant expert becoming the leader for a particular aspect of the task. So, the team electrician may lead when the power supply systems are installed but someone who is good at managing schedules might lead on the organising of deliveries. Successful teams share leadership as well as other roles and good team members are able to 'follow' as well as 'lead' when needed.

- Make sure you consider task and team issues when working in a team – it's not just about getting the job done.

What are the key team issues?

There are two aspects to a job you tackle as a team: task issues that relate to the job to be done (e.g. installing a new heating system, designing a factory production line) and team issues (e.g. making sure everyone knows what they need to do and how the team can help them). Successful teams offer support to all the individual members by agreeing the key points of the task at the start, monitoring how everyone is doing and offering support when needed. This means team members are honest and listen to each other without making judgements. They are willing to help out even if a part of the task is not officially their responsibility and will take advice and direction from other members when needed. Teams typically have a mixture of formal meetings at key points in the process but also share constant informal communications – yes, teams tend to chat! A feature of the most successful teams is that after the job is finished, they are keen to work together again. This is called team cohesion.

- Make sure you talk and listen to your fellow team members – a problem can often be solved within the team when it is shared. Learn to offer, and accept, help when needed but do it in a respectful way and don't just take over.

How often do teams need to meet?

Successful teams tend to meet regularly and often – even if it is only online. These meetings are business-like and professional but sometimes include some personal conversations as well to help build team cohesion. This is not just small talk and can be important – but good teams don't use their meetings just to chat! Activities outside formal meetings can also be important to build team cohesion – this might be a drink after work, raising money for a charity or even going on 'team building exercises' with a training company. Since communication is vital, the most successful teams meet often enough and have mechanisms to ensure information is shared with the whole team even if individuals cannot attend because of illness or some other business commitment.


- Make sure you have enough meetings to ensure team efficiency and cohesion and that everyone is expected to attend. Do not miss meetings in your own team – they are a priority.

Why do teams fail?

Working in teams is more productive and powerful than working alone or in a competitive


group. However, teams do fail. Typically, teams fail because one member tries to take over and tell everyone else what to do or the team splits into smaller groups who argue. Some tasks are very difficult, even impossible, and when things start to get rough it is tempting to blame team members (e.g. 'he hasn't done his job properly!' or 'she forgot to bring the toolkit!'). Blame always destroys teams. Teams that fail typically fall apart as soon as the task is over (even if it was eventually completed successfully). They have no team cohesion.

- Make sure you take the team issues as seriously as the task issues – a team that starts to argue and blame each other will fail – and waste a lot of time and money while they do it.


Check yourself

You should be able to answer these questions easily after reading this sheet.

1. What is the difference between a team and a group?
2. What behaviours can undermine a team?
3. Team skills are often mentioned on job adverts. Why do companies value them so highly?


Taking it further

These activities will deepen your understanding of this topic.

1. Think of the times when you have to work with other people. Identify situations that worked well – and some that were not so good. What made the successful group or team work so well? How was that different from the other time? What tips can you take from the successful group and how will you use these when you have to work with other people?
2. Reflect on the way you contribute to teams you work in. Think of ways you help the team to succeed and maybe some things you do which you feel could be disruptive. Be honest – you do not need to share these lists with anyone if you do not want to. Identify one thing that you will do more of and one thing you will try to do less of next time you work in a team to make the team more productive and fun to be in.