

Teams 101

The Importance (and Challenges) of Teams

Why do some teams perform well while other teams fail?

This semester you will be working in teams on a group project. This probably won't be the first time you've worked on a team – many of you have played team sports, or worked in a team on club activities; and most of you have worked in teams on group projects in other classes.

Have you ever been on a team where your teammates don't show up on time, or don't do high quality work, or argue with each other? What I'm asking is, have you ever been on a bad team? I'm sure most of you would answer "yes" to this question. Why is this? Why is it that some teams are great and other teams are not?

I believe it is because few of us know exactly what it takes to make a team successful.

- We often work in teams but we rarely think about what we can do before, during and after a team project to increase the likelihood that we will be successful.
- We often talk about the **task** we have to perform (like win a soccer game if you are on a sports team, or perform community service if you are in a club, or make a presentation for a class team project) but we rarely talk about the **process** we will use to interact with each other to make this happen.
- We hope that our team will perform well, but when things start to get off track, we rarely address our concerns with our teammates. It is just too uncomfortable.

Why Teams101?

This paper is all about teams – why teams are important, what a good team does, and how you can enhance your team's performance! I call this "teams 101" because this is the basics. It is amazing how a few simple things can have a dramatic impact on team success.

Why Learn about Teams?

Simply put, we should learn about teams because teams are everywhere! As recently as 25 years ago, most of the work done in organizations remained at that individual level. In 1987 a Center for Effective Organizations study found that only 28% of Fortune 1000 companies employed at least one self-managed work team. In 1999 that number was up to 72%; in 2000 that number was up to 88%.

So...chances are good that you will work in a team.

And, for good reason. Good teams can perform at a level greater than the individual teammates. A May 2013 report of 821 business executives from 14 countries found that:

- 9 out of 10 companies surveyed agree that the problems facing them are so complex that teams are essential to provide effective solutions
- 88% believe teams are the best way to address increasingly complex business problems;

- 83% feel that improving our organization’s ability to develop and manage teams will be essential for future competitiveness

Organizations need teams to handle complex problems. Therefore, more and more workers are being organized into teams. A 2013 Darie study found that 92% of companies report that teams are critical, but only 23% report that they are effective. It is clear that we need help improving team effectiveness.

Fortunately, teamwork isn’t magic – it is a skill that can be learned. Teamwork is like riding a bike or writing a paper. It takes some learning, some practice, making some mistakes, getting some feedback, and trying again! We all need to learn how to work in teams. In fact, in a recent survey by the National Association for Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2014), the #1 desired quality in a new graduate is teamwork.

Top Attributes Employers Seek	Percentage of Employers Seeking Attribute
1. Ability to work on a team	77.8%
2. Leadership	77.8%
3. Written communication skills	73.4%
4. Strong work ethic	70.4%
5. Quantitative skills	68.0%

There is a tremendous body of research on teams and teamwork. I’ve pulled from this research that shows what works and doesn’t work to identify a set of competencies that team members must engage in to be successful. Research shows that:

- If you learn about what good teams and good team members do, you will have a positive experience, be happier, do a better job on your task, and be ready to be a good teammate in the future.
- People who focus on the **task** they are engaged in and on the team **processes** that team members are engaged in will be more satisfied and perform at a higher level than those who don’t focus on these important factors.

In summary, if you learn about teams, you can avoid the frustrating things about teams. Do these frustrating things sound familiar to you based on your past team experience?

Most Frustrating Things About Teams
Ineffective use of meeting time
Ineffective communication
Lack of accountability
Individuals who don’t complete assignments
Lack of preparation in meetings
Not everyone pulls their weight
Uneven work distribution
Lack of trust among team members

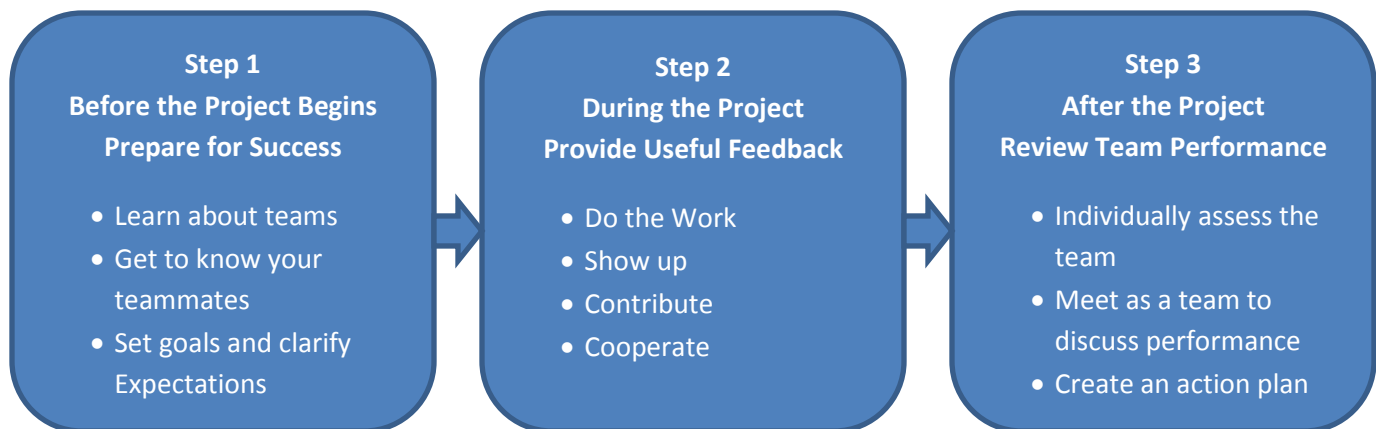
Fortunately, it is not difficult to be a good team. Research shows us that there are just 3 things every good team does.

Three Steps to Team Effectiveness

A good team will...

1. Before the project begins – Prepare for Success
2. During the project – Provide useful feedback to team members about their performance
3. After the project – Review team performance at key points and makes adjustments

Let's examine these in greater detail.



Step 1. Prepare for Success (before the project begins)

Preparing for success requires that teammates:

- Learn about teams
- Get to know their teammates
- Set goals and clarify expectations

Learn about teams

That's what you are doing by reading this paper. It is important to understand that a tremendous amount of research has been conducted on teams. We know what effective and ineffective teams do. Once you learn what effective teams do, you are more likely to build an effective team.

Get to know your teammates

This sounds simple – sure you want to get to know them, take their contact information and find out when you can meet as a team. However, you also want to determine who has what skills that will make your team a success.

- Do you need to write a paper for the team project? Figure out who has good writing skills!
- Do you need to create a PowerPoint ? Figure out who can make a really strong PowerPoint presentation!
- What if your project requires a skill that nobody on your team has? Figure out how to “fill the gap” now, before the project begins!

Having this conversation with your teammates will help clarify roles and provide you with a richer understanding of the skills required to successfully complete the project. Research calls this having a “shared mental model” – it ensures that you are all on the same page.

Sets goals and clarify expectations

You need to have a goal everyone is working for. You want what the research calls “goal congruence” where there are clear, understandable goals, shared by all, and accepted by all. Is your goal an “A” on the project? If so, make sure everyone agrees and is committed to this goal.

You also need to clarify expectations about how people will act on their way to achieving the goal. Will everyone do their fair share of the work? Will you show up on time for meetings? Figure out what is important to your team to help you be successful.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, you need to determine how you will address it if people aren’t acting the way they should on a team. You can’t just let people “get away with it”. They must be held accountable for their work.

What kinds of goals and expectations should you set? Lots of research finds that there are 4 categories of expectations we should have for our teammates:

1. Do the work – outside of the team meeting, teammates should develop content to support team goals – they need to understand the content, do the work by the deadline, and do high quality work
2. Show up – teammates should come to meetings on time and utilize time wisely at meetings
3. Contribute – teammates should participate during team meetings and be focused on task accomplishment
4. Cooperate – teammate should be respectful of others and work in best interest of team

The table below shows example behaviors of a poor, good, and great teammate for each of these four categories. Do these behaviors look familiar to you? What kind of teammate are you?

Competency	Poor Teammate	Good Teammate	Great Teammate
1. Do the work	Is not prepared Doesn't do work Does poor quality Minimal contribution	Defines the task Understands goals Gets work done on time Is well prepared	Organizes work of others Ensures others are ready Follows up with teammates Volunteers help
2. Show up	Doesn't show up Shows up late Is unaware of time Is distracted at meeting	Shows up for meeting Shows up on time Is ready to work Uses time wisely	Sets meeting agenda Leads process Leads discussion Holds other accountable
3. Contribute	Doesn't work on task Takes group off task Focuses on own task Does not participate	Participates Shares information Is focused on team Stays on task	Motivates teammates Balances team and task Integrates efforts Monitors progress
4. Cooperate	Dominates team Is defensive Does not listen Acts in self interest	Listens to others Is open to feedback Respects team Is flexible	Involves others Creates positive environment Resolves differences Promotes functional conflict

There is a lot to accomplish before the project begins. But, like everything else, a strong foundation will support team success in Steps 2 and 3 of this process.

Step 2. Provide useful feedback to team members about their performance (during the project)

It is frustrating when people aren't pulling their own weight. Research calls this "social loafing". I call it dealing with a slacker. Everyone must work together as a cohesive team to be successful. However, you want a team that is not *too* cohesive. If everyone thinks alike, this can result in "groupthink". It is important to challenge one another to ensure you make the best product.

The best way to ensure that everyone is pulling their own weight, that you are challenging one another, and that everyone is working in the best interest of the team, is to provide teammates with feedback. However, sometimes this is tough. There are several typical problems with teammate feedback:

- We often want to maintain the friendship rather than provide honest feedback.

- Often, teammate evaluations are conducted at the end of the project – at this point, it is too late for teammates to consider the feedback and change their behavior
- Feedback is often too general – “rated 3 on a 5 point scale” or “not cooperating well”. More specific behavioral feedback can help teammates improve performance.

It is critical that all team members are open to receiving feedback, and that we provide our teammates with feedback on specific behaviors that are important to team success.

Go back to the previous section and review the list of poor, good, and great teammate behaviors. If one of your teammates was acting as a “poor” teammate, you should provide them with feedback letting them know that you want them to act as a “good”, or even better, a “great” teammate.

Step 3. Review team performance at key points and makes adjustments (after the project)

After the project, or at key points during the project, it is important for teams to “step back” and assess their task work (how they are doing on the task) and teamwork (how they are working together as a team). We call this a “team debrief”. During the project, team members provide individual feedback to teammates on their performance. A team debrief is different. During a team debrief, team members come together to discuss the effectiveness of the *team*, not of individual members.

Team Debriefs are a quick, yet powerful experiential learning tool for enhancing team performance. During a debrief, team members reflect upon a recent experience, discuss what went well and identify opportunities for improvement. They attempt to build a common understanding (e.g., about work challenges, team member responsibilities, how best to handle a situation) and establish agreements to ensure future success.

A team debrief should actively involve all team members and ensure their participation:

- All team members should have with the opportunity to reflect upon the team’s recent experience(s)
- Individuals’ responses should be anonymous, allowing team members to feel safer and more apt to provide candid input and feedback
- Targeted discussion points should guide the discussion and explain why the team is encouraged to discuss the issues identified
- Team members should see that the discussion is based directly on their input, so they feel it is a discussion worth engaging in
- Team members should see that the focus is on teamwork rather than personalities, and on team improvement rather than assigning blame; together this stimulates a more constructive type of conversation and greater participation

Simply stated, done correctly, debriefs work. Research indicates that teams that conduct effective debriefs outperform other teams by an average of 25%. For example, when BUDV450 teams were taught how to conduct effective debriefs, their teams performed far better than those BUDV450 teams that did not debrief. As debriefs cost little to conduct, they are among the most cost-effective ways of promoting on-going learning and ensuring team effectiveness. Debriefs work because they help teams learn from their experiences and self-correct over time.

Summary

So...what can we do to enhance team effectiveness? Here are some tips for before, during, and after the project:

<u>Prepare for Success (before the project)</u>	<u>Provide useful feedback (during the project)</u>	<u>Review team performance (after the project)</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learn about what it takes to be a successful team• Spend time getting to know team members• Set goals and expectations for your work• Commit to upholding goals and expectations• Identify how to deal with teammates who don't uphold team standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide teammates an evaluation several times during the project• Provide evaluations based on important team competencies described in this paper• Let teammates know the specific behaviors they do well and not so well	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engage in a debrief process• Individually, then as a team, assess team performance• Discuss important issues that are a challenge for the team• Create an action plan for improvement based on your team debrief

Conclusion

You may be surprised, but doing everything discussed in this paper doesn't take a lot of time.

- Prepare for success – Spend no more than 1 hour of class time learning about teams, getting to know your teammates and setting goals and expectations for performance
- Provide useful feedback – Spend 10 minutes several times throughout semester providing your teammates with specific, behavioral feedback on their performance
- Review team performance – Spend 20 minutes twice a semester meeting as a team to discuss performance issues

Commit one hour in class and less than an hour and a half outside of class over the course of the semester, and research shows that you will have a more positive experience, you will be happier with your team, and your team performance improve. That's teams 101.