

Introduction to Teamwork

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Definition of Teamwork

Definition

The ability to work as part of a team is one of the most important skills in today's job market. Employers are looking for people who can contribute their own ideas, but also want them to work with others to create and develop projects and plans (Hashim, 2015).

Teamwork is an essential part of workplace success. Like a basketball team working together to set up the perfect shot, every team member has a specific role to play in accomplishing tasks on the job. Staggers, Garcia and Angelhood (2008) suggest that teamwork is incorporated within the higher education curriculum for a number of reasons including:

- assisting students to construct knowledge with alternative viewpoints,
- improving communication, and
- providing students with the opportunity to practice the generic skills required for the workforce.

Teamwork must be considered an individual skill and the responsibility of every individual in the organisation. Not treating teamwork as an individual skill and responsibility allows otherwise highly skilled employees to justify their non-performance by pointing fingers at others (Avery, 2009). A team is a living and dynamic entity. It could progress from an early to a mature phase, independent of the nature of the team or the task it must perform.



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Transmission Approaches for Teamwork

Theories and concepts which inform our understanding of human teamwork are well documented in the literature. We can use these approaches in particular to understand the interaction between human thinking and behaviour.

Sycara (2006) groups them into eight categories:

1. **Social psychological approaches:** Focus on relationships and interactions between team members
2. **Sociotechnical approaches:** Focus on work-related implications of team members' relationships and interactions
3. **Ecological approaches:** Focus on the effects of organisational or working environments on teamwork
4. **Human resource approaches:** Focus on the utilisation of team members' capabilities and talents
5. **Technological approaches:** Focus on technological progress
6. **Lifecycle approaches:** Focus on changes in team performance during the lifecycle of existence
7. **Task-oriented approaches:** Focus on team roles, functions, and tasking
8. **Integrative approaches:** Consider multiple different approaches



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Teamwork - Challenges and Solutions

Challenges

It is believed that teamwork can both be pleasant and challenging. It depends on the circumstances. For example:

- **Some team members might avoid responsibilities** (just to avoid accountability).
- **There might be a "right or wrong thinking"** for different team members. Such behaviour might negatively affect their decision-making.
- **Moreover, some team members might think in "Win-lose" categories.** This can remarkably reduce confidence and efficiency in the team.
- **Focus might be on solving the wrong tasks,** which means that team members often work on tasks that have low priority or are not even prioritised.
- **Sometimes, efficient communication within the team is lacking.** For example, critical decisions are sometimes taken by the project management without involving the team. Moreover, some team members do not even pay attention when important issues are raised.
- **Sometimes, there is an unreleased potential of learning.** There have been observations that many teams spend little time reflecting on how to improve how they work, and they do not discuss obvious problems. Some of the teams that carry out regular retrospective meetings struggle to convert their analysis into changes in action. Among those who try to remedy identified problems actively, several give up after seeing little change.
- **The absence of leadership qualities needed to facilitate teamwork is particularly problematic.** There exist teams, where nobody in the group is capable of organising a well-functioning working team. There are no discussions about managers taking on responsibility or ensuring that teamwork is put into practice.
- **Another problem might be a lack of organisational prerequisites for teamwork.** For example, development leaders, each upholding a specific area of expertise and all belonging to the same development department are supposed to work together as a team. Together they represent important perspectives to take into account when working toward the common goal for the team. (Nilsson, 2018)

Solutions

There are different ways to respond to these challenges by creating an atmosphere that enhances the spirit of teamwork.

- **Commitment to team success and shared goals.** Team members are committed to the success of the team and their shared goals for the project. Successful teams are motivated, engaged and aim to achieve at the highest level.
- **Interdependence.** Team members need to create an environment where together they can contribute far more than as individuals. A positive interdependent team environment brings out the best in each person enabling the team to achieve their goals at a far superior level. Individuals promote and encourage their fellow team members to achieve, contribute, and learn.
- **Interpersonal skills.** Interpersonal skills include the ability to discuss issues openly with team members, be honest, trustworthy, supportive and show respect and commitment to the team and to its individuals. Fostering a caring work environment is important and includes the ability to work effectively with other team members.
- **Open Communication and positive feedback.** Actively listening to the concerns and needs of team members and valuing and expressing their contribution helps to create an effective work environment. Team members should be encouraged to give and receive constructive criticism and provide authentic feedback.
- **Appropriate team composition.** The right mix of team members is essential in the creation of a successful team. Team members need to be fully aware of their specific team role and understand what is expected of them in terms of their contribution to the team.
- **Commitment to team processes, leadership and accountability.** Team members need to be accountable for their contribution to the team. They need to be aware of team processes, best practice and new ideas. Effective leadership is essential for team success including shared decision-making and problem solving.
- **Discussions and practicals.** Organisations should put efforts into helping team members in developing sustainable teamwork skills through topical discussions and practicals. Team members need to know their responsibilities in the team so that they will be able to work together.



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Development Approaches for Teamwork

Development approaches

in 1965, Tuckman proposed a model of group development, which includes the following five typical phases:

- **Forming:** This is the initial orientation period. The team is unsure about what it is supposed to do. Team members do not know each other well or are not yet familiar with the way the team leader and the other members work. This stage is complete when the members begin to see themselves as part of the group.
- **Storming:** This is a sorting out period where members begin to find their place as team members. The team members now feel more comfortable giving their opinion and challenging the team leader's authority and recommendations. Some members may become dissatisfied and challenge not only the tasks of the team and how these will be carried out, but also the leader's role and style of leadership. This is the start of intragroup conflicts.
- **Norming:** Team members begin to use their past experiences to solve their problems and pull together as a cohesive group. This process should result in the team establishing procedures for handling conflicts, decisions, and methods to accomplish the team projects.
- **Performing:** In this phase the team has achieved harmony, defined its tasks, worked out its relationships, and has started producing results. Leadership is provided by the team members best suited for the task at hand. Members have learned how to work together, manage conflict and contribute their resources to meet the team's purposes.
- **Adjourning:** The team dissolves when the team has completed the project. It may be reoriented to continue in a next phase of the project.

In addition to Tuckman's model, the development approach proposed by Neve (2010) is helpful. He explains team development along four phases.

- **Beginning - Goals and expectations:** This phase, which parallels with the forming-storming stages of the group development model by Tuckman (1965), deals with clarifying learning goals and expectations. The focus of this phase is on providing information to all teams, motivating students towards achieving the expected outcomes and helping them to build their teams.
- **Midpoint - Developmental coaching:** This phase deals with assessing team progress and with providing feedback for individual and group development. It parallels the norming-performing stages of the group development model by Tuckman (1965). The instructor's role is that of a coach and facilitator who is available for, and initiates, consultation and support. The focus of the midpoint intervention is on helping each team improve their team processes and deal effectively with problem members or disruptive behaviours.
- **End - Evaluation:** This phase deals with two distinct processes: (a) evaluating the team's projects and individual students' contributions for grading purposes, and (b) assessing each student's individual teamwork competencies.
- **Future - Assessment for programme improvement:** In both work and educational settings, there are three distinct but related purposes for assessment: evaluative, developmental, and outcome assessments. While evaluative and developmental approaches are used to provide feedback to an individual about his or her performance, the primary goal of outcome assessment is to determine how well a programme or a pedagogical approach is meeting the desired learning goals.

In the developmental phases proposed by the two group development models, teamwork involves particularly building relationships and working with others. This involves:

- Working cooperatively
- Contributing to groups with ideas, suggestions, and effort
- Communication (both giving and receiving)
- Sense of responsibility
- Healthy respect for different opinions, customs, and individual preferences
- Ability to participate in group decision-making.

Being a good team member is learning how to understand your personal strengths (what you have to offer) and where you might need to draw assistance from others. Becoming a functional member of a team is learning to understand what you bring to the group and what you might need from others (Hashim et al., 2015)

Moreover, teamwork brings in other skills like:

- Active listening skills
- Clarifying and summarising skills
- Time management skills
- Flexibility with team rules
- Conflict management skills.



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