

1.5.10: Teams and Team Dynamics

Learning Objectives

Explain advantages and disadvantages of teams and team dynamics

It may seem obvious to say so, but groups are made of humans, and humans express behaviors that are both beneficial and detrimental to the function of their teams. People who feel they are part of a team are often mutually supportive and report greater job satisfaction. However, not all teams are successful. In one survey, only 14 percent of companies rated their teams as highly effective^[1], around 50 percent rated them as somewhat effective, and 15 percent rated them not effective at all. In this module, we look at teams and how effective teams are developed. We start by looking at common behaviors that can help or hurt efforts to meet organizational goals.

Advantages

Teams bring together people with diverse skills to create something that no one person could do alone. A well-planned team improves **motivation**. Communication is higher on teams, and the diverse skill set means teams can discover new approaches. Because teams have specific shared goals, team members usually enjoy greater autonomy, variety, task identity, task significance, and feedback. Teams often enjoy the social support for difficult tasks, improving morale and motivation.

Another benefit of teams is to improve product and service quality. Each Whole Foods grocery store operates with an average of ten “self-managed” teams, including produce, prepared foods, groceries, etc. Each store also has a team made up of just the leaders from each team to facilitate communication and sharing. Each team takes responsibility for the quality of the products and service in its area.

Efficiency in product development is another advantage to building teams within the traditional hierarchy. Teams can analyze and identify dependent tasks in a nonlinear process, sometimes realizing startling improvements.

Employees also benefit from participating on teams. They develop relationships to people from other areas of the business and learn more about what is happening across functional department lines (**cross training**). Additionally, 69% of people who have personal relationships or friendships with their coworkers report job satisfaction and that they are engaged at work, compared to less than one third of people who do not.^[2]

This might be hard to take: your employees aren’t loyal to your company — but they are loyal to the people that built it, and those who keep it running. Employees with strong bonds of camaraderie are more likely to remain loyal to their team, and stay longer as a result.^[3]

According to LaFasto and Larson in “When Teams Work Best,”^[4] there are four aspects of a good relationship: constructive, productive, mutual understanding and self-corrective. These four aspects are the basis for LaFasto and Larson’s Connect model (Table 1), which can be used to develop good relationships.

- A **constructive** relationship can also be between a person and the team. “Good relationships are constructive for both people.”^[5] In order to have a constructive relationship, there must be trust and mutual understanding between both parties. Constructive relationships do not happen overnight, it takes time to develop trust and to be open with others.
- **Productive** relationships are important because if the relationship between two individuals on a team is not productive, the team may not be productive. Productive relationships also, “allow us to focus on real issues—the ones that matter—and to do so in a way that makes a difference.”^[6]
- **Mutual understanding** is critical because, “[it encourages] us to focus on and understand the other person’s perspective, and [it offers] us the satisfaction of being understood.”^[7] Not only is it important to validate another person’s point of view, it is important for us to be validated. It goes back to trust and building a constructive relationship; in order to be understood, you have to be able to understand others.
- Good relationships are **self-corrective**, like a good marriage in which each partner is committed to improving the relationship. By continuing to work on improving a relationship, you are developing trust and mutual understanding among the parties.

Social cohesion is defined as the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other to survive and prosper. In work teams, social cohesiveness means the members want to be part of the team and want to contribute to its success. Members of cohesive teams have social and emotional bonds to each other and to the overall team, which motivates higher commitment and

performance. Southwest Airlines, for instance, works hard to develop cohesiveness in its organization. As a result, everyone is willing to work toward the success of the organization. That is why it is not unusual to see people pitch in on a task even when it is not part of their job. For example, pilots may help to load luggage if it helps maintain on-time performance.

The main factors influencing cohesion are size of the group, similarities among its members, and team success. Small groups tend to be more cohesive than larger ones because people can interact with each other more. Similarity among group members contributes to team cohesiveness because people with similar backgrounds are more likely to have fewer communication barriers and share views on what constitutes appropriate behaviors. People are generally more trusting of others when they share some important background experiences. In substance abuse recovery groups, for example, members know that everyone has had the same ailment and is dealing with similar experiences. When a team experiences success early in its development, members get reinforcement that their efforts can produce results. They are more likely to be motivated to continue to contribute. Success also creates a sense of pride that fosters feelings of belonging and mutual attraction in the team.

Collective efficacy is the team's belief that its members are capable of organizing and working together to reach its goals. Creating collective efficacy is a bit of a balancing act. If goals are perceived as being too easy to reach, members may not feel they have to put in their full effort. On the other hand, if goals are perceived to be too difficult, members may feel their effort doesn't matter because the goal cannot be reached regardless of how hard they work. In either case, social loafing may result. But when the goal is "just right," difficult but not impossible, the team will believe it can reach it only if it works hard together.

Psychologist Albert Bandura researched the relationship between efficacy and job performance and found that each affects the other. When a team achieves some success, it can build self-confidence and the belief that it can achieve more. The resulting collective efficacy, in turn, makes it more likely that the team will be successful. But a downward spiral can occur when both performance and collective efficacy are low. Poor performance makes team members question their ability, and the decrease in collective efficacy leads to more poor performance.^[8]



Figure 1. The relationship between success and collective efficacy is affected by self-confidence and performance.

Good planning and good leadership can both improve collective efficacy. When the tasks needed to reach the team's goals are being planned, initial activities should lead to demonstrable team achievements. When teams experience successes early in their development, they are more likely to build collective efficacy. Good leadership provides a clear vision for the team and articulates why the goals are important. The leader provides guidance, feedback, and encouragement. When teams receive timely feedback, they are more likely to understand the relationship between their effort and their performance.

As you work on developing good relationships, another way to foster good group dynamics is to identify strengths and weaknesses and assign group roles. For a new team that has not worked together, assigning roles can also help surface individual strengths and weaknesses. By simply assigning roles at the beginning of the project, a team can quickly focus on specific tasks. Everyone should be responsible for brainstorming, problem solving and offering their experience and knowledge, but some roles are more generic and may or may not vary by task. Here are four roles that no team should be without:

1. **A Leader:** In the event there is no clear chain of command, a team must be prepared to assign the role of leader. A leader can keep the team focused, mediate conflicts, and ensure that individuals are held accountable.
2. **A note taker or scribe:** Again, a simple idea, but documenting every meeting is an important step in developing a productive team. A scribe can quickly get a team up to date with past notes, so little time is wasted remembering where the conversation left off. By documenting and distributing notes from each meeting, the scribe can keep all members of the team equally informed.

3. **Lessons-learned tracker:** Identify one person to track both positive and negative outcomes of meetings and projects. This individual can solicit input from other members. Documenting what everyone thinks went well and why, and what did not go well and why, can keep a team productive by not repeating past mistakes.
4. **Devil's advocate:** Teams need to embrace conflict and different points of view. A devil's advocate is a person who brings up alternatives or objections to other's ideas. Assigning such a role can make the team more objective and reduce problems like Groupthink. Because this person's role can stir up conflict, it can be helpful to rotate who plays the devil's advocate for the team.

Think of cohesion as morale. It makes sense that a group that enjoys each other's company is more likely to come together to work toward a common goal. Once everyone is working toward success, little successes occur along the way. This success helps the team's morale spiral upward. Teams move past being solely task- or work-focused. They become work-friends, maybe even social friends. This closeness of relationship adds to the productivity of the team as members are more likely to speak directly even as difficult issues arise.

Disadvantages

There are also many problems that hinder good group dynamics. We don't usually have the luxury of picking who we are going to work with on a team; dealing with different personalities and personal agendas is a common challenge in working within a team. Other common challenges include poor leadership, a lack of focus, dominant personalities, bad communication, groupthink, and social loafing. The key to combating these challenges is to be able to identify when they are taking place.

Poor Leadership

The first challenge that hinders good group dynamics is poor leadership. There are a few things an individual can do if the poor team leader is your boss or someone with authoritative power. First, be supportive. If your boss trusts you and you are supportive, you may be able to influence decisions by suggesting alternatives. If the poor leader did not assign a devil's advocate, suggest it during a team meeting and explain why you think it would be beneficial. Once the devil's advocate is in place, coach him or her to bring up alternatives. When alternatives are out in the open and debated, the weak leader may see that there are stronger ideas available.

Lack of Focus

Lack of focus can make a team just a group of individuals. Keeping the team focused takes constant effort. A good leader can keep teams focused and on task by assigning roles and enforcing accountability. A good method to keep teams focused is using an agenda and distributing it prior to meetings. An agenda can get people on the same page and will encourage them to prepare based on the topics under discussion. Even a functional and mature team should have meeting agendas and planning documents in order to be sure no one is making assumptions about the group's direction or undertaking a plan that has not received consensus.

Dominant Personalities

Dominant personalities are difficult to deal with; the loudest voice doesn't always have the best ideas. Sticking to an agenda, establishing protocols during meetings, and having an effective leader can be used to combat strong personalities.

Bad Communication

Bad communication is a quick way for a team to be unproductive and ineffective. By using a scribe and lessons-learned tracker to document team meetings and activities, a team can be kept up to date and in the loop. An effective team leader can assign tasks and hold people accountable for their contributions, which can prevent social loafing and encourage good communication.

Groupthink

Groupthink is simply going along with the team on a decision because that seems to be the consensus and they want to avoid conflict. It can also be the result of the group talking itself into a decision that doesn't fit the facts. Having a strong devil's advocate will help reduce the chances of groupthink.

Social Loafing

Social loafing is when one or more group members fails to do their fair share of work within the group. You may have witnessed this behavior firsthand on a team or school project. There are two main consequences of social loafing: The free-rider effect is when one or more team members do not put in their share of the work, assuming others will cover their shortfall. The other is the sucker effect, where other team members reduce their effort in response to the free rider's behavior.

Several causes exist for social loafing. A member may not be motivated by a goal and may not want to work to achieve it. Or a member may feel that his or her contribution to the team will not be recognized, so the member is not motivated to contribute. Both of these causes are more pronounced in large teams. Social loafing is also more likely when there isn't an individual evaluation system in which the performance and contributions of members are regularly reviewed. Finally, if there is unequal compensation and the members of the team feel the compensation is unfair, they will be more likely to lessen their effort.

A good manager should monitor employees to watch out for these social loafers or “slackers.” The manager is responsible for making sure all team members are carrying their fair share of the work they have been assigned. If the manager doesn't address occurrences of social loafing, they can create a stressful work environment that may turn into conflicts among coworkers.

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1. Traci Purdum, “Teaming, Take 2,” Industry Week 254, no. 5 (May 2005): 41–44.
 2. Dickson, George. “The Value of Peer Relationships at Work.” Employee Recognition and Company Culture - Bonusly Blog. Accessed March 08, 2019. <https://blog.bonus.ly/the-value-of-peer-relationships-at-work/>.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Lafasto, F., Larson, C., When Teams Work Best, Sage Publications, 2001
 5. Ibid.
 6. Ibid.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Shauna Geraghty, “How Self-Efficacy Affects Workplace Performance,” Talkdesk, March 23, 2013, accessed Aug. 2, 2017, <https://www.talkdesk.com/blog/the-relationship-between-self-efficacy-and-workplace-performance>.

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