

Teamwork Skills

Teaming Up

Teamwork has become one of the most important elements of work today. It hasn't always been this way, though. Consider what happened at Lights Up Inc., a company that makes lamps and other lighting fixtures.



At Lights Up Inc., the people who made the light fixtures didn't talk to the people who designed them. The people who designed the light fixtures didn't talk to the people who sold them. Rather, the managers talked to each other. If one of the industrial engineers, who worked in Halifax, had a design problem that would affect the manufacturing process, which was done in a factory in Truro, he told his manager, who then brought it up at the once-a-week managerial meeting.

This system broke down for three reasons:

1. In the late 1980s, Canada went into a recession, and companies had to become more efficient, or they would go bankrupt. They realized that they didn't need so many managers. Why not just have the industrial engineer talk to the equipment operator?
2. Loosening trade barriers between countries meant competition from manufacturers around the world. Canadians saw other lamps and liked them. Lights Up Inc. had to adapt quickly in order to survive. The salespeople needed to let the industrial designers know right away what customers wanted. The company couldn't wait until the next week's managerial meeting.
3. Computerization meant everyone could now talk to each other through e-mail no matter where they worked, and the conversations could be as fast as any face-to-face meeting.

How does Lights Up Inc. run its business today? By having everyone work in teams. An idea for a new light fixture starts as brainstorming among a team of designers, salespeople and production workers. Problems that used to take weeks to solve get solved in a day. Each member of the team is able to understand the needs of other members. And, rather than having managers whose only job it is to oversee people, one member of the team is its leader.

There is almost no one in today's workplace who does a job in isolation. Each worker has to get along with people who have different ideas, attitudes, opinions and beliefs.


Teamwork skills are really a combination of interpersonal skills, communication skills and consensus-building skills.

Thinking about teams

You've probably been on a number of teams. Perhaps you've played on a sports team, played in a band or musical group, been part of a stage production, or worked on a group project for a class. These have given you teamwork experience, although you may not have thought much about it at the time.

Take a deeper look at teamwork. Write down your answers to these questions:

1. What do you like about doing group work in school?
2. What do you dislike about doing group work in school?
3. Would you like group work more if you could pick the people in your group? Why or why not?
4. If you could pick your own group, what personal qualities would you like your group members to have? Why?
5. Based upon your experience with group work in school, what do you think are the most important teamwork skills?

Keep this list in your portfolio. 

Good Team Members

Your list of qualities for a good group member probably includes some variations of these three items:


- good attitude—fits in and works well with others
- can do the job—has the necessary skills and abilities
- will do the job—is reliable and can be counted on

Your teamwork skills

Now look at your own qualities that relate to working with others in a group.

1. Use a chart like the one below. In the first column, list all groups, teams, clubs or other organizations to which you have belonged. Leave some space beneath each one.
2. In the second column, write all the transferable skills that you have learned from being in that group.

Groups, Clubs, Teams, Organizations	Transferable Skills I Have Learned From the Experience
e.g., ball hockey newsletter committee	e.g., teamwork meeting deadlines

Keep this chart in your portfolio. 

Group Dynamics

Why do geese fly in formation, instead of alone? Geese fly about 10 percent faster in formation, and up to 70 percent farther. Geese also share the lead. When the lead goose tires and rotates back into the “V”, another moves forward as the leader. Also, when a weak goose drops out of the flight, a stronger goose drops back also, to help and protect it.



ACTIVITY

Synergy

Look up the word “synergy” in the dictionary. How does it relate to how the geese survive? How does it relate to your own teamwork?

Of course, human beings are more complex than geese. But when you work in groups, you have to contribute to the overall effort, and help others. In a band, a drama group or a sports team, everybody has a role to play. How does synergy relate to these groups?

Group dynamics have to do with the way group members deal with each other. Studying groups in action can tell us what works and what doesn't work in a group or team.

Fishbowl

Divide the class into two groups of equal size. Arrange the desks so that one group sits in a circle, facing each other, in the middle of the room. The second group sits in another circle, outside the first group. This arrangement is called a fishbowl. The inside group has a task to perform together. The outside group observes the inside group performing its task.

The task of the inner group is a “team-building exercise” designed to get the group members working together. Here is a simple one. Your teacher may have others from which to choose.

The Task:

Using index cards, create the tallest house of cards you can. You have 10 minutes. This is a contest.

Each member of the outer group is assigned one member of the inner group to observe. Each observer takes notes on what their person does and says during the activity.

After 10 minutes, measure the height of the structure and record it.


Now switch the groups around. The new inner group has the same task to perform, also within 10 minutes.

The new outer group observes, each member taking notes on the actions of the person they are assigned to observe.

After 10 minutes, measure the height of the new structure and record it.

Now debrief the exercise. Each group, in turn, gives their observations about the activities of the other group. Keep in mind what we learned about giving and receiving feedback. Answer the following questions:

1. What happened in the group that helped them to work effectively as a team?
2. What happened in the group that got in the way of their being an effective team?
3. From the comments, make two master lists, one with things that help a team to be effective, and the other with things that keep a team from being effective.
4. Compare your lists with the ones below. Add any that you think are needed on your lists.

All class members keep a copy of these lists in their portfolios. 

What Makes a Good Team?

- A clear goal. Everyone understands and agrees.
- High standards. Everyone giving their best.
- Strong leadership. Direction, encouragement, inspiration and support.
- Members supporting and helping each other.

Teamwork Means “All for One and One for All”

Every team is composed of individuals. For the group to function well, its individuals must be encouraged to give their best. So a good group is one in which individual members can:

Contribute ideas openly. How is the group ever going to get the best out of its members if they aren't free to offer what they have?

Stay focused. We can all remember times when discussion went on too long, or wandered far way from topic.

Feel free to ask questions. Have you ever figured everyone knew what was going on but you? A good group allows people to say: “Hold on a second. I don't get this.” Chances are, you aren't the only one who doesn't understand.

Actively seek information and opinions. Be curious and active about learning new things.

Follow directions. Once a decision has been taken, all members work towards the common goal.

Solve problems. Each team member should feel free to contribute their unique skills and knowledge to deal with problems.

Leadership

The leader is concerned about the direction of the group: Where do we want to go? Why? Are we still going in the direction we want? Do we need to change direction?

ACTIVITY

Leaders

1. Think of someone you know who is a good leader. It doesn't matter how old the person is, or what position the person holds. List characteristics that make that person an effective leader.
2. Discuss your list with the rest of the class, and come up with a master list of good leadership characteristics.
3. As a class, brainstorm a list of characteristics that would make someone a bad leader.
4. Assess your own potential as a leader based on these characteristics.

Leadership in Action

“The Outdoor Education program at our school included a spring backpacking trip. One of the best learning experiences was right at the beginning of the trip. We had to go up a steep trail to get on top of a ridge. Because the group included students with varying degrees of physical fitness and experience in the bush, it didn’t take long before some of them, labouring under heavy packs they had never carried before, were lagging behind, while others wanted to rush to the top of the ridge. One of our ground rules was that if anyone lost sight of the person directly in front, we would stop the whole group until everyone was together again. Some of the more athletic members of the group got upset at the delays. They didn’t need to rest. Others, however, caught on quickly and stayed behind to help and encourage those who were having a harder hike. By the time we got to the top of the ridge and looked out over the rugged countryside, most people understood. We were a team. We did things together. We succeeded together. The leaders were not the ones who were the fastest to the top.”

—High School Teacher



Reflection

Go back to the chart of transferable skills you made in the Discovery activity on page 63. Add any further information that now seems relevant. Choose at least two skills that you want to work on, and create a plan for developing those skills.

In our earlier analogy of a hike in the bush (page 54), we talked about the destination, the compass and the map. The leader uses all of these to keep the team going in the right direction. Good leaders, however, are never so focused on the destination that they forget about the team members. If no one is following, you aren’t leading.