



When Teams Work Best

6,000 Team Members and Leaders Tell What It Takes to Succeed

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Introduction

Teams are everywhere in business and industry, and in government, schools, hospitals and professional associations — indeed, almost everywhere where people gather to get things done. But some teams work better than others. What does it take to make teams work effectively?

To answer that question, more than 6,000 team members in a variety of organizations were surveyed. They assessed their teams, their team leaders and each other against a common set of criteria and responded to open-ended questions. From the safety of confidentiality, they identified what encourages teams to success and what discourages them into failure.

Five crucial areas emerged.

1. Team Members

A successful team begins with the right people. What qualities distinguish people who make effective team members? The survey points to six factors. The first two fall into the category of working knowledge, while the other four are about teamwork itself:

- *Experience*. This is the first thing a team looks for in its members. Whether the team is about to embark on cardiac surgery, mountain climbing or building an airplane, members look for someone with practical knowledge relevant to its

objective. Individuals rapidly discover that there are members of the team who know and speak from experience and others who don't know and simply speak.

- *Problem-Solving Ability*. As a team's work progresses, another quality begins to surface. Irrespective of their level of experience, some members of the team are good at clarifying the problems that inevitably arise, bringing them into focus, getting them understood and devising solutions.

- *Openness*. When team members describe the teammates who contribute most to attaining the team's goal, the characteristic that shows up most frequently is openness — the willingness to deal with problems, bring up issues that need to be discussed, help create an environment where people are free to say what's on their minds, and promote an open exchange of ideas.

- *Supportiveness*. The second teamwork factor people see in effective team members is supportiveness, the desire and willingness to help others succeed.

- *Action Orientation*. Good team members make a deliberate effort to make things happen, rather than passively waiting and hoping others will do something about the problems or opportunities at hand.

- *Personal Style*. Good team members have a positive personal style. They motivate others, offer

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positive energy and new ideas, have an infectious enthusiasm about the work, get along with everybody and make others feel comfortable. They aren't cynical, defensive or hard-to-work-with whiners who throw cold water on everything.

2. Team Relationships

Many teams fail because although the individuals may be highly knowledgeable, competent and well-intentioned, as a group they don't build productive relationships. The research shows that good relationships are constructive for both parties, are productive, are characterized by mutual understanding and are self-corrective — both parties are willing to make adjustments that will improve the relationship.

Interestingly, the research shows that people tend to think they're better at relationships than they really are. In self-assessments, people rate themselves much more favorably on relationship capacity than their colleagues do.

To foster team relationships, members must become adept at giving and receiving feedback. Feedback is a gift — received in the proper frame of mind, it allows us to find out something about ourselves that others already know and gives us the opportunity to do something about it.

But too often feedback is threatening. It's important, therefore, that people give feedback constructively. That involves committing to the relationship by defining their place *in* the relationship rather than *over* it. They also have to optimize safety by committing to avoid doing anything that makes the other person feel uncomfortable as well as working to understand what the other person has to say.

It's also important that the discussion be narrowed to one issue at a time. Defensiveness must be neutralized by understanding what issues cause defensiveness in others and agreeing to avoid those subjects.

3. Team Problem-Solving

A major part of any team's work consists of solving problems to advance the team toward its goal. Team problem-solving, however, is often an uncertain and complex process.

The survey shows that three key factors differentiate effective from ineffective teams. The first is the degree to which team members are focused in their ef-

forts. Effective teams are very clear about what they're doing at each moment of their work, while ineffective teams are unfocused, with their effort diffused.

Good problem-solving teams also operate in a positive climate. They're relaxed, comfortable, informal, fun and warm. They have ways of making their members feel accepted, valued and competent. Personal agendas aren't elevated above the team's goal.

Finally, they have open communications. If something is interfering with the team's performance, it gets talked about. In an ineffective team, by contrast, communication is closed — inhibited by an aversive leader or the memory of painful experiences in which such discussions were managed poorly.

Effective team problem-solving requires a five-step process:

- *Identify the Problem.* What's the single question whose answer is all the group needs to know to accomplish its purpose?
- *Create a Collaborative Setting.* Agree on principles for discussion, such as being fact-based and being tough on the issues but not each other, and bring out any assumptions or biases that are associated with the question being considered.
- *Identify and Analyze the Issues.* What issues, or subquestions, must be answered in order to achieve full understanding of the complexities of the overall problem?
- *Identify Possible Solutions.* What are the two or three most reasonable solutions to the problem, and the advantages or disadvantages of each?
- *Resolve the Single Question.* From those possible solutions, which is the most desirable?

4. The Team Leader

Although most people would agree that the right person in a leadership role can add the spark that drives a successful collective effort, defining the specific behaviors of an effective team leader has been elusive. From the written evaluation of 600 team leaders by those 6,000 team members, the following six dimensions emerged as critical for an effective team leader.

- *Focuses on the Goal.* The team leader must help the team achieve as much clarity as possible regarding its direction. He or she must help the team members believe in that direction, whether the goal is of their choosing or handed to them, capturing their imagina-

tion and inspiring them to work hard to achieve it.

- *Ensures a Collaborative Climate.* The team leader must ensure a climate that enables team members to speak up and address the real issues preventing the goal from being achieved. Once a meeting has ended, for example, do team members meet informally to discuss their real thoughts and feelings about an issue that should have been addressed at the team table?

- *Builds Confidence.* We like to be around people who strengthen our confidence, and team leaders have to do that by ensuring that results are attained, exhibiting trust in assigning responsibility, being fair and impartial, accentuating the positive, and saying thank you.

- *Demonstrates Sufficient Technical Know-How.* The team leader should understand the body of knowledge directly related to the achievement of the goal.

- *Sets Priorities.* Teams fall apart when a leader makes everything a priority. The leader must help people to focus on the crucial initiatives.

- *Manages Performance.* Team leaders must challenge unacceptable performance and deal forcefully with non-team-playing members.

5. The Organizational Environment

It's crucial that the organizational environment be productive rather than create roadblocks to success. That involves three elements:

- Management practices must set direction, align effort and deliver results. Goal priority should be a preoccupation, reiterated frequently and passionately by the leader.

- Structure and processes must ensure that the best decisions are made as quickly as possible by the right people. The right people are those most relevant to the issue, in terms of both technical knowledge and managerial responsibility. The right time usually means early enough to give the right people a chance to frame a problem or an opportunity, and to explore critical is-

sues by gathering relevant facts. The right issue is a problem or an opportunity that, if left unaddressed, places limits on achieving the goal.

- Systems must provide reliable and useful information and drive behavior toward desired results. Personal, financial and psychological rewards must be linked to the group goal so that team victory is more important than personal victory.

Conclusion

Although our unique ability to think may be our gift as human beings, it's our capacity to organize and integrate our collective thinking that will continue to determine our evolutionary niche. More than ever, it's important that we refine and maximize this elevating capacity to work together. After all, no matter how remarkable our individual talents, only our ability to collaborate will allow us to address and solve our most meaningful problems. **e**

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The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable, by Patrick M. Lencioni, John Wiley & Sons, 2002, ISBN 0787960756.

The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork: Embrace Them and Empower Your Team, by John C. Maxwell, Thomas Nelson, 2001, ISBN 0785274340.

The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization, by Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, HarperBusiness, 1994, ISBN 0887306764.