

10 Team Characteristics for Effective Teamwork

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Effective teamwork is what makes organizations succeed. Whether it's a band, a baseball team, or a Fortune 500 company, chemistry is at the heart of what makes teams great. Much of modern business thinking is centered on understanding the chemistry of what makes effective teamwork tick. And the best way to learn ... is by doing, as Confucius says.

An important leadership competency for any size organization, the ability to build and lead high performing teams is especially critical in small-to-midsize businesses. Here, people must work closely together, wear many hats and work effectively across the organization to get tasks accomplished quickly enough to remain competitive.

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In order to understand the competencies needed to build and lead high performance teams, it is helpful to first define a team. Here is a simple but

effective description from *The Wisdom of Teams* (Harvard Business School Press, 1993.)

“A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.”

More often than not, effective teamwork is built on the following ten characteristics:

Clear direction

Sometimes, organizations are in such a hurry to move on their projects that they pull together groups of people without first deciding on the goals and desired outcomes. In his book, *Team Renaissance: The Art, Science and Politics of Great Teams* (Old Man River Publishing, 2013), Richard Spoon explains that without a clear sense of what the team needs to accomplish and how a successful outcome will be defined, it's impossible to assemble the right group of people to get there.

So decide on team goals and desired outcomes first. Use it for clear direction for the team you select. Start at the end point: What is the

outcome you want and why? Leave the team flexibility to develop the best way to get there.

Open and honest communication

Communication is the close brother of chemistry. In any team, communication is crucial to building a sense of camaraderie between members. The manner of communication — how freely and frequently team members communicate — determines the effectiveness of the team. Put simply, the more freely you talk to your fellow team members, the more comfortable you are in sharing insights and ideas. This is just one major reason why modern businesses emphasize communication and collaboration tools.

The most important part of communication is listening. Listening is not just a way to find things out. It's also a sign of respect. So send the message that your conversation partner is valuable. Listen like you mean it. Demonstrate that you're listening. Paraphrase, re-state, and react to what you hear. Ask for clarification. Get involved.

Support risk taking and change

Good teams support appropriate risk taking and experimentation for change. They look on first time mistakes as opportunities for learning.

Defined roles

Roles might shift somewhat once the team is assembled, but understand the skill sets and thinking styles are needed on the team. If a team needs to develop a new product for market, that team will need a detail-oriented person (the task-master), who is methodical and can keep the team on track.

The explorer will be more of a big-picture thinker who can help the team see what is possible. The number-cruncher will take charge of measurement and metrics. It's possible your team will have other roles to fill, but you should have a good handle on those roles before you begin staffing.

Once you have a plan for those basics, begin choosing the strongest team members to carry out the project.

Mutually accountable

Teams accept responsibility as individuals and as a team. They don't blame one another for team mistakes and failures. No one should spend any time, useless time, in personal justifications. They should celebrate their successes together and recognize special performances and contributions that each team member makes to the total work of the team.

Communicate freely

Communication is the cousin of chemistry. In any team, communication is crucial to building a sense of camaraderie between members. The content of the communication is rather irrelevant, as researchers at MIT's Human Dynamics Laboratory have shown. Rather, the manner of communication – how freely and frequently team members communicate – determines the effectiveness of the team. Put simply, the more freely you talk to your fellow team members, the more comfortable you are in sharing insights and ideas. This is just one major reason why modern businesses emphasize communication and spend significant time each year on social communication and collaboration tools.

Common goals

A chief characteristic of any successful team is that members place the common goal above individual interests. While scaling individual targets is great for personal morale, teams succeed when they understand, appreciate and work with a common purpose.

Encourage differences in opinions

Agreeing on a common goal is essential. But it shouldn't come at the cost of suppressing alternative ideas and opinions. Having divergent opinions within a team enhances team performance; a diverse team is its competitive advantage.

Diverse opinions stir imagination and new ideas. Imagination and new ideas stir creativity. Unless the status quo is threatened and questioned, you won't find those crucial "out of the box" ideas.

Collaboration

Close collaboration is a trait shared by every successful team, whether it be the Apple leadership team or Lennon-McCartney of the Beatles fame or Jordan-Pippen of the Chicago Bulls fame. The idea is simple enough: the more you collaborate and the more you communicate, the more you create.

Team trust

Team members who cannot trust one other or who don't believe in the process and goals of the team seldom find success. Effective teams focus on solving problems. Trust is an adjunct of effective communication; there can be trust between team members only if they are allowed to air their views freely. This is the reason why organizations often undertake team-building exercises that put team members in positions of trust.

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