

# Teamwork

Some Practical Guidelines for Building and Sustaining Effective Teams



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by Kendall L. Stewart M.D.

# Introduction

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**The chance to perform with a world-class team is not limited to talented athletes, brilliant intellectuals or wealthy businesspersons. In fact, most such folk will never get the chance. Instead, the possibility of exceptional teamwork is either created or excluded by the people on the team. Most people who serve on teams don't have what it takes. It takes selflessness and single-mindedness. It requires the willingness to stretch and take risks. Some serendipity is always involved. And superior teamwork is hard to sustain.**

**But even the momentary team triumph is a compelling joy and an enduring motivation. Even less than stellar teams get a lot of work done. And if you are continuously engaged in the effort to create and nourish effective teams, you are more likely to look around some day and realize that you've arrived. You are part of a real team. This essay outlines some practical recommendations that will assist you in that pursuit.**

## Pick the right people

This is the most important step. And it is one of the many things in life easier to talk about than to do. When you are asked to lead or join a team, you may have no choice about the other members of the team. It's the sandlot revisited. You get to choose from the players that are there and those not already picked for another team. Each team player brings a different level of skill and motivation to the game, and the magic or the mundane is in the mix. When choosing teammates, look for these qualities. The best team players desperately want to contribute, and they are willing to share the spotlight with others. They care more about team performance than their own stats. Specialized skills are vital but so is the willingness to learn. Team stars are dependable and flexible, and they are always looking for a better way to get things done. Tolerant and good-humored, they still expect peak performance from themselves and others. They find ways to make the most of others' strengths and to work around shortcomings. They deliver on their commitments, set limits and make their expectations clear. The best team members are focused on values and performance. They are action oriented, and they are quickly frustrated by the organizational tendency to talk things to death.

You are not likely to find all of these qualities in any single team member much less in every person on the team. But you will need to recruit or develop these qualities if you intend to shape a competitive team. Don't forget to look inside yourself. Which of these assets will you bring to the table? If you are not fully engaged, that will be apparent to the rest of the team and they will be less inclined to push themselves.

## Trade up

Some team member turnover is inevitable and desirable. It presents the opportunity to acquire better players. It is frustrating and uncomfortable to "start over" and incorporate these "strangers" into the group, but it is also invigorating. The rookie's different perspective – though not usually welcomed by all – is a fresh breeze that raises dust and ruffles feathers. This is a good thing. The team that settles into a stale coziness is in real danger. Exceptional teams are charged with an underlying uneasiness that disrupts the natural human tendency to drift.

If the opportunity to trade up doesn't present itself, you must make it happen. Your obligation is clear. You must field the best team you can. Tepid competitors must be

benched until their minds and hearts are back in the game. Teamwork is not therapy. Feeling good is not the objective – performance is. This is neither an invitation nor a justification for autocratic hatefulness or disruptive caterwauling. It is a call for prompt, constructive confrontation and the willingness to risk team cohesiveness to stay on the edge. Kindness and toughness are not mutually exclusive.

## Encourage conflict

Conflict is the unreasonably feared ghost that haunts the psyches of most team players and organizational leaders. It is always knocking on the door and we dread to let it in. Our efforts to avoid conflict are both humorous and pathetic. To be honest, most of us have lost sleep and compromised vital organizational initiatives because we were fearful that expressing a different point of view might offend someone – particularly the boss.

But conflict need not be feared. It is not necessarily hurtful or destructive. Encouraged and responsibly managed, conflict catalyzes group innovation, discourages bland “groupthink” and toughens team combatants for the challenges ahead. Conflict is a nuclear reactor that must be carefully controlled. It is a valuable source of organizational energy, but a catastrophic interpersonal meltdown is always a possibility.

If you are the boss, reinforce those with the courage to disagree with you. Make sure that you demonstrate disagreement without being disagreeable. Invite dissenting opinions and remind the group that contrasting views in the formative stages of any campaign produce sounder strategies later on. Don't tolerate personal attacks. Watch for emotional arousal – in others and yourself. This is the early warning light that the reactor is overheating. Use non-judgmental brainstorming early and often. Invite everyone to make his or her best case succinctly, while limiting repetition. Everyone tires of endless disagreement and longs to get on with it. Once a decision has been made, don't rehash it forever. Do welcome reconsideration when the arguments for it are compelling.

## Be patient

If the tasks before you are straightforward and your goals are easily reached, you don't need a team. Teams work best when the precise goals are not defined and the solutions to poorly understood problems have not yet been found. The process of clarifying the problems, setting priorities, inventing and then implementing solutions and finally documenting improvement is what teams are made for. Teamwork is often frustrating, a group exercise in muddled and mindless groping. But it is this exasperating struggle that drives great teams to sharpen

their focus and ultimately produces innovative solutions team members working alone would have never considered.

Most teams move through predictable stages. It is easier to be patient with others and ourselves if we understand this natural process. The initial social, exploratory stage is usually pleasant and good-humored. Conflict inevitably follows when individuals propose “obvious” solutions that others perceive as silly or premature. The real teamwork follows. The emphasis changes to performance during the implementation phase. Then the team breaks up or takes on new challenges.

Moving through these stages takes more time and energy than some would wish. It is easy to become impatient with the process. You can move things along without short-circuiting the vital process by asking clarifying questions and inviting colleagues to take tentative positions. Asking about next steps and focusing on the available data or the need to obtain important additional information will be more successful than just venting your frustration.

## Be impatient

Team members can be too nice to each other. In fact, misguided patience with team process often damns the team to the hell of organizational paralysis. Everyone loves to talk and almost everyone mistakes analysis as an end instead of a means. Generally speaking, the higher one rises in an organization, the more one becomes convinced that he or she is primarily paid to think instead of do. This is nonsense. All of us are paid to think and do.

When you realize that the team has stopped problem solving and started ruminating, call it to your colleagues' attention and insist on an action plan. One of SOMC's most capable organizational leaders, Brent Richard, once pointed out to me that 80-90 percent of the software engineering is done after the product is out the door. The best teams act, then reflect on the lessons learned, not vice versa. An aggressive bank executive put it this way. “Everyday, I make it my business to make a decision. If it turns out to be a mistake, I'll just make another decision and reverse it.” Impatience is a virtue too.

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## Maximize strengths and minimize weaknesses

When we are children, we tend to think of others as all good or all bad. When our parents give us what we want they are good. When they punish us they are bad. With experience we come to realize that it is not this simple; we all possess assets and liabilities. When it comes to assessing the organizational value that a particular person brings, it is not a question of whether that individual is good or bad, it is a question of net value. Those persons who are net positive to the company must be retained and supported. Those who are net negative must be extruded. The same is true of team members.

After a time, we all know what others' strengths and weaknesses are. We don't see our own as clearly. Even so, all team members are responsible for playing to each other's strengths. You can lend a hand by acknowledging your weaknesses and by pointing out others' strengths. Consider strengths and weakness when making assignments. Don't waste time trying to turn everyone into a well-rounded team member with the same suite of skills. It has been said that you should not try to teach a pig to sing. First, it won't work. Second, it annoys the pig. Instead, divert resources to those persons who will pay the highest organizational dividends. And in case you haven't already figured it out, the highest-ranking persons in any group are sometimes the poorest investment risks.

## Stay focused

Alluring distractions litter every organizational landscape. Complainers who see a problem and consider it their calling from God to bring it to your attention are eager to make their issue your priority. We all want to talk about whatever is on our minds at the moment, and every meeting is a great soapbox opportunity. It is common for bigwigs to confuse business meetings with group psychotherapy. It may be up to you to point out the difference. If you insist that the team stay focused, you won't be named Most Popular, but you will do the team a real service.

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Distractions are inevitable. Your challenge is to see them for what they are and to respond appropriately. At any point in time, every effective team knows what its priorities are, how success will be measured and which team member is leading a particular charge. If your team doesn't yet know these things, point this out and insist on patching this hole in the boat. When priorities are set, you have a blueprint for the team's efforts. If a discussion item is not related to one of your priorities, a question about whether the team should even be discussing this matter is usually enough to get the work back on track. Colleagues that consume team time and energy to pursue personal agendas should first be confronted privately. If that fails, confront them publicly. If that fails, bench them.

## Exploit crises

There are two challenges that every effective team must master. Teams must learn to survive and thrive in a crisis and in everyday organizational life. Weathering a crisis is the easier of the two, but the team's fate is decided more quickly in a storm. Organizational crises cause tempers to flare, invite shoot-from-the-hip overreactions, encourage individual showboating and tax physical and emotional reserves. Few of us are at our best during a crisis. Good information is sparse. The time for thoughtful reflection is limited. There are a thousand distractions, and redundant planning and approval loops often retard execution.

But there is nothing like a crisis to build a team's cohesiveness and confidence. There are a number of practical things you can do to use the crisis to the team's advantage. Keep team members together during the crisis as much as possible. Focus on the crisis and delegate everything else. Except in a life-threatening emergency, take time to explore all of the available options. Take time to uncover those creative options that are not immediately apparent. Then pick the best available option and implement it. Recognize emotional arousal as a signal that impulsive action is in the offing. If time permits, second-guess yourselves before you launch an organizational missile instead of afterwards. Cut each other a lot of slack during this trying time. Recognize that everything you try won't work and celebrate with vigor when you have survived the crisis and the team is still alive to fight another day.

## Concentrate on real work

Have you been to a seminar designed to promote "teamwork?" Were you inspired and challenged or bored and aggravated? Because we all recognize that effective teamwork is important and difficult to bring off, we are all anxious to find some shortcut that will create effective teams quickly and painlessly. No such shortcuts exist. Instead, these silly bonding exercises

convince the best potential team members that the last thing they want to do is waste time on a team. The same can be said of the usual social activities designed to brew Buddies Light. Most real people dread these things and go through the motions, feeling obligated and fronting saccharine smiles while seething inside about this waste of their time.

There is a much better alternative. Just get on with the work. When on a business trip, clarify current issues instead of socializing at meals. Bring home a clearly written document. The participants will get some sense of satisfaction and those back home may eventually realize that your trip was not just another expensive junket. If a seminar stinks, leave and reconvene in the hotel lobby to brainstorm or to develop a workable action plan. Socializing does have its place, but accomplishing something meaningful together is the best bonding activity available.

## Look everywhere for leadership

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Formal leaders attract the most attention and receive the most credit in the typical organization. The informal leaders get most of the work done. There are some exceptional leaders among the titled elite and they often grace the cover, but the inside story is that most organizations succeed or fail based on the leadership at the customer interface. That's not to say that executives have no impact, it's just that they have less impact than is usually assumed.

Exceptional executives know that leaders at every level of the organization are critical to the mission. These executives create environments where good ideas are supported, competent people flourish, natural leaders at all levels are nourished and the focus is on action instead of analysis.

Every person is a potential leader. While it is true that some of your colleagues will choose to exercise negative leadership, most of your teammates long for a chance to shine, to call a play, to carry the ball, to advance the cause.

You can flush potential leaders out by passing responsibility around and by playing to each person's strengths. Adopting the radical notion that the best business idea and its successful execution are the things that matter most will stimulate nascent leaders to a degree that the "command-and-control" crowd could neither imagine nor tolerate.

## Be careful not to coast

After a team has enjoyed some success, the natural celebration tends to morph into prolonged self-congratulation and a dangerous sense of complacency. It's fine to speak of the stimulation of challenge, but most of us prefer the anesthesia of ease. Meeting regularly to enjoy each other's company, checking off routine tasks and reflecting on what a good company this is to work for are the pleasant symptoms of a deadly infection – a festering forgetfulness that there are others out there right now figuring out how to eat your lunch. When you see that your team has lapsed into this perilous reverie, sound the alarm. Keep your pulse on the competition. Keep reminding everyone how far your numbers fall below the best practice metrics in your industry. Make others uncomfortable with your less sanguine perspective of the latest positive financial performance. Identify organizational weaknesses and suggest strategies for shoring them up. Suggest new projects that require risk-taking. Remain convinced that things are not as good as they seem and act on that conviction. Stay focused on the future. Ask, "What is the next step?" Effective team members are not contrary, but they are not comfortable and they are not comforting.

## Hold each other accountable

The differences between team members are both the team's greatest asset and its most significant liability. We all bring unique gifts, disparate interests and different priorities. Some of us are organized and efficient and some of us are not. Some of us do what we say we will do when we say we will do it. Others will grease only squeaking wheels, put everything off till the last moment and express surprise when team members are annoyed. Worst of all, some team members will undermine the team's efforts by talking out of school, creating disruptive organizational chaos or by failing to "walk the talk." Those frustrated with their colleagues' inappropriate behavior typically whine to the team captain and then to others when this leader doesn't police the team the way the grouser recommended. Even worse, disgruntled colleagues may vent their spleens in public through snide comments or obvious pouting.

Don't fall into such organizational ruts. When you have a

beef with a colleague, go to him or her privately. Ask if you can speak frankly. Share your perceptions and frustrations openly. Consider mitigating circumstances. You may have misunderstood. But after you have listened carefully and said your peace, make your expectations clear again. And extract a definite performance commitment. Only when it is clear that this approach has failed should you bring the matter to the entire team. When you see your teammates indulging in the usual back stabbing gossip, blow the whistle on that behavior too. You cannot fail to hold each other accountable. The organizational stakes are just too high.

## Do something

We all agree that meetings are the biggest time wasters in our organizational lives. Why? Everybody talks and nothing gets done. We love to hear ourselves talk. We lunge at the chance to point out why this or that won't work. We want to make sure that our perspectives are considered. We enjoy thinking aloud and we delude ourselves that others enjoy our ramblings as much as we do. The less we know about something, the stronger we feel about it. Talk is the smoke screen we hide behind. It suggests that something significant is going on. Too often, it's just smoke. No one would deny that some talk is necessary if teams are to properly consider all available options, but the emphasis should always remain on action.

Keep your personal project list within reach at all times and stay focused on your own deliverables. Speak up as soon as team conversations veer off course. Keep the group focused on the available options no matter what issue is on the table. Volunteer to follow through and then see that you do. Ask other members of the team to accept responsibility when that is appropriate and then check back with them regularly to see how the project is progressing and to offer your support. The responsibility for remaining action-oriented rests with every member of the team, not just the team leader.

## Document results that matter

Most teams quickly get caught up in the process of teamwork and forget to measure outcomes. For as long as people have been talking and writing about process improvement, they have reminded us that we will only change what we measure. But there is so much to measure and you can't measure everything. Indeed, the data bog in which we are daily forced to wallow is perhaps the greatest impediment to organizational success.

Making up your mind to find the measures that matter is the first step. You will discover that identifying key performance indicators is more difficult than you first thought. Deciding what really matters takes time and energy and most of your

colleagues won't be interested. To free up organizational resources to track these indicators, your team will need to stop collecting some of the data that currently rains on its desks. Even if you can find no one who sees any real value in collecting the current data, you will discover that the collectors will want to continue collecting it. They've been doing this to the best of their abilities for some time now, and change brings out the defensiveness in all of us. Your campaign to document team results that matter will be a hard one. Make the case repeatedly for adopting key indicators. Make a pest of yourself by asking for the data at every meeting. Inquire about benchmark data and related best practices. You will not have completely arrived until you have persuaded your team members to tie their compensation to the team's performance on selected key indicators. Teams that measure things that matter produce results that matter.

## Take some risks

Those petrified by the fear of failure take the biggest risk of all – the unwillingness to take risks. The best teams don't buy lottery tickets with the organization's resources, but they take limited risks all the time. They celebrate – tolerate is more like it – failures that produce learning. But most teams are risk adverse. Autocratic team leaders are the most common reasons that team members choose to play it safe. If the only tool the boss has is a hatchet, everything looks like a limb, and no one will want to get caught out there. Unduly critical colleagues exert the same negative impact. There is a world of difference between holding each other accountable and using the predictable failure of genuine engagement to gore a vulnerable colleague.

Praise your colleagues who stretch and stumble while reaching. Admit your own failures and invite critique. Obtain informed consent from your team before launching a risky initiative and then gently remind them that they understood the risks of being on the cutting edge when the effort fails. Make the case for taking a particular risk beforehand instead of acting impulsively on your own and then expecting your friends to rally in misguided support of your recklessness.

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## Have some fun

The most recent studies suggest that a good number of us are not happy in our jobs. Many practicing physicians say they wouldn't choose medicine again, and most of them recommend that their children not pursue medicine as a career. George Pettit, M.D., often says, "What else could you do and make such a good living working in a pleasant environment, serving folks who are – for the most part – genuinely grateful for your efforts?" Everyone who knows George would say he has a lot of fun while he works. But most people don't enjoy their work as much as George does.

Make it a point to have as much fun as you can at work. Laugh at yourself a lot. Spend as much time as you can with others who enjoy their work. Avoid the malcontents. The hilarity of everyday life offers ample opportunity to rejoice. Taking an emotionally detached view of the swirling intrigue and perverted earnestness exhibited by the striving masses won't make you less effective; it will preserve a measure of your sanity, and serve to remind that organizational success may not be the most important thing in life after all.

## Expose secrets

Secrets are the weapons of first and last resort for the selfish, the insecure and the incompetent. The emotional infrastructure of many teams is decaying, collapsing from the damage that the rust of secrecy has wrought. Persons who cannot make a credible case for their positions or who hope to snatch a larger piece of pie at the expense of others are especially enamored of secrecy. Secrets are the drugs most favored by organizational junkies seeking the temporary rush of perceived positional power and a passing sense of self-esteem. Teams riddled with secrets will not survive the predictable organizational storms that test us all.

When others preface their comments with the ingratiating and threatening request that you hold what they are about to say in confidence, just say no.

They are offering you the most addicting organizational drug on the street. Once you are hooked, you are at the mercy of underground pushers, and the only way to get your daily fix is to seduce others into the same perdition. Insist that complainers "go public" with their concerns. Offer to go with them to confront the person being undermined. Make it clear that you will tell others what they have said. Make notes and

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send them a letter putting the issue on record. Practitioners of "real world" organizational politics – craving control above all else – will complain that this view is naïve. And there would be some truth in that. The world is not a perfect place. You cannot show all of your cards and survive every jousting with the black knights that you encounter in the organizational forest. What is your objective? Do you want to play on a team where most of the action is under the table or do you want to encourage others by your example to be open and aboveboard? Do you want to build long-term relationships or achieve your short-term goals at any cost?

## Break up the work into projects

At this pace, the tasks of our daily lives quickly blur in our rearview mirrors. There is always more to do than you can possibly get done. Even if you are careful to set priorities and follow through, those priorities change. Most of us fall into the habit of tending to the stuff right in front of us. We leave important things half done and divert our efforts to the latest blip on our radar screens. This tendency reduces high performing teams to mere groups of people that get together regularly to chat about whatever is on the agenda that day.

There is a better way to retain focus. When you organize the work into discrete projects, you are more likely to set timelines, measure progress, provide meaningful updates, actually implement something and document outcomes. Of course you will decide to kill some projects off, but that decision will be reached by team consent and everyone will elect to move on to the next project at the same time. The more common approach leaves each team member slogging through individual lists that may turn out to have little to do with what the team is really trying to accomplish.

## Expect continuous learning

This is another one of those values we all mentally genuflect before; then we go to work and do our best to act just the way we did yesterday. It's the more comfortable way. We all continue patterns of thought and behavior that have long proven counterproductive. For example, those of us who habitually

keep others waiting continue to show up late knowing full well that it frustrates others and undermines credibility. Real learning is not demonstrated by attending a seminar, collecting another degree or reading a practical essay on teamwork. Real learning is manifested by sustained behavioral change.

You must begin by deciding exactly what you want to learn. Then you must figure out how you are going to demonstrate that you have mastered it. It is this expectation of measurable behavioral change that is essential to the learning organization. When you have done it, you will then possess more persuasive clout. Reinforce others when you see that they are learning, and gently confront your colleagues when they are not.

## Encourage innovation

Innovation rarely characterizes teams that are always on task. Most innovation is the result of thinking – not doing. Innovation is the most creative aspect of team process, and it is easy to miss the opportunity to innovate in the rush to perform. Persons without time to think are unlikely to suggest creative solutions. Fearful colleagues will concentrate on conforming instead of transforming.

Take time to think. When someone suggests an innovative alternative, make a big deal about it even if the idea is impractical. Never let go of your personal conviction that

there is a better way, and raise this certainty when the team sees limitations instead of possibilities. Change the team's working environment. Discard the tools you typically use and force yourself to invent new ones. Spend time with other successful teams in other industries. Give the creative persons on the team time and space to craft their priceless gifts.

## Conclusion

Already fairly rare, effective teamwork is likely to become rarer still. Today's conflicting demands and the technological encouragement of isolation over community, production over relationship and skill over commitment will make it harder to create and sustain high - performing teams. Individual productivity will soar, but teamwork may suffer.

There are still some things that teams can do that individuals cannot. Individuals can climb mountains; only a team can move them.

Because of the incredible potential that teams bring to our lives and organizations, making them more effective is a mission worthy of our best efforts. The list of things that make teams fail and that help them succeed is endless. Those things are right in front of us everyday at work. Each of us can make a difference. And we ought to try.

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