

Being part of the team

If you want to succeed, you have to be a team player. The mantra is prevalent in many corporate cultures. So what makes teams work? And why do they sometimes fail?

STEPHANIE WHITTAKER

Freelance

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It has become a mainstay in the workplace. It's the widespread message that anyone who wants to have a successful career must be a team player. But what are workplace teams and why are they so widespread now?

"The definition of a workplace team is a group of people working toward a common goal," said Michel Daigle of Communic.Aide, which specializes in "developing human potential" in workplaces. "A team is composed of people who have different skills and they complement each other."

Mark Mortensen, a professor in McGill University's management faculty, says teamwork became prevalent in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when companies were eliminating middle management positions.

Reasons to be part of the team

There are several reasons for workers to become good team players and doing so can help bolster their careers, Daigle says. They include:

Having a sense of belonging: "Technology isolates us," Daigle said. "If you work on a sales team, you may spend a lot of time away from the office. After awhile, we get tired of being alone. People want to work with others because it gives them a sense of being part of a community within a company."

Accountability: "When you promise your team you'll deliver something that will be outstanding, you create expectations," he said. "If you don't deliver, your team will be disappointed. This makes you accountable and people want to be held accountable for their work. It's challenging."

Recognition: Daigle says the trophies and recognition awards he's won for teamwork are more satisfying to him than those he's won alone.

"These awards represent a shared experience," he said. "Being a team player can bring you recognition and that recognition reminds you of the work you do together."

Intellectual diversity: Several brains are more powerful than one.

"Working with a team allows you to gain knowledge and measure what you learn," Daigle said. "If you're an athlete who works out alone, it's hard to measure your progress. When you run or cycle with others, you have a better sense of what you have to do to improve. On a team, you take learning to another level."

How teams work

There are particular dynamics in team work, Daigle said. "There are arguments and decision making. Sometimes, it's arduous. You have people who are fast, physically and mentally, and people who need time to think and wait for others to think before they act. People play off each other in a team."

Many workplace teams operate virtually in the global economy. McGill's Mortensen, who specializes in researching how global teams function, says one of the big challenges of virtual teams, which are spread across the globe, is the lack of context in their interactions.

"You speak on the phone and communicate by e-mail so you don't see each other," Mortensen said. "You may be in Montreal and are working with someone in Bangalore, India. You send an e-mail to someone there and get no response. You send another and get no response and then you get annoyed. Later, you find out that it was a national holiday and no one was working. People underestimate the amount of information they get when they work face-to-face with people and bump into them in the hallway or around the water cooler. You don't have that in geographically distributed teams."

Some organizations pay lip service to workplace teams but undermine their existence by rewarding individuals on those teams, Mortensen said.

"Compensating and rewarding individuals can work against motivating the team. If you say the team is important but you reward individuals, you're going to create tension."

Ideally, says Mortensen, it's important for companies to measure "metrics other than just performance. You want to assess whether the members of the team built cohesion and whether they could work together again."

Normand St-Vincent, a workplace consultant and professor at the University of Sherbrooke, says another challenge faced by internationally dispersed teams is time delays.

"Also, the cultural diversity of these teams makes it important that the members should have a face-to-face meeting at the outset," he said. "You need a crash course in diversity."

He said the common thread that binds teams is that they must enunciate a clear common purpose from the beginning.

"They have to set up rules and processes," St-Vincent said. "Members must know how to listen and negotiate. Most teams, unfortunately, just run with the ball without defining rules from the outset."

Jason Katz and Dan Levine, who run Atmosphere Communications, which offers team-building events and training to companies, found themselves working on a virtual team themselves recently while pulling together an event for a company that would send 600 employees to Montreal for a meeting.

"We had four or five companies working with us in different cities and we collaborated to put together a project in three weeks," Katz said. "The leaders on the team had to communicate extremely well and quickly. Most of these people had never worked together before."

What makes them break down

A few of the elements that can sink a team, says Michel Daigle, include an absence of trust among the members, a fear of engaging in conflict, a lack of commitment to the project, refusal of members to take responsibility and an inattention to the results of the team's work. "It can be a problem if team members are too focused on their own work and are unable to see the big picture," he said.

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A team's winning conditions

Successful teamwork evolves under particular conditions, says human resources consultant Allen Annett.

They include:

A work environment in which individuals are able to venture their thoughts and ideas safely without being dismissed or ridiculed.

Learning from mistakes, viewing errors as positive rather than negative.

Respecting each other.

Having effective listening skills.

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