



## UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING TEAMS - QUICK TIPS

*Understanding the utility and benefits of teams in the context of academia is important, as it is an arena that tends to celebrate the value of individual credit, personal freedom and the ability to chart your own path. It also sees many people from different backgrounds coming together in collaborative efforts all the time. Learning ways to preserve the individualistic ethos of academia while taking advantage of the potential power of teams is a necessary tool needed for navigating that environment. Here are five quick tips for managing productive groups of people in the workplace.*

### Know What Teams are Good For

- Some projects or challenges are best tackled by an individual, some are best spread across a team.
  - ✦ For instance, individual performers may excel at focused research, long-term writing assignments, drafting plans for execution of complex decisions, and critical analysis of emerging hypotheses. Larger groups may excel at brainstorming, identifying new opportunities, executing complex work that must be completed simultaneously, and making decisions where input from multiple perspectives is mission critical.
- A team that is united by a shared sense of purpose can cooperate to work efficiently through major challenges towards a common goal; one that is disorganized or lacks a shared mission can be potentially less productive than a single person.
- An individual working autonomously might lean towards presenting "safer" options and ideas to their bosses/advisers/professors. Given the opportunity, groups can accept more risk and, as a result, sometimes generate a larger pool of potentially more ambitious ideas than a single person.
- Of course, the opposite can also be true, where a team of people might get bogged down in the echo chamber of 'groupthink' while an individual might come up with an unorthodox solution. As always, maintaining a balance is key, between encouraging creative ideas and keeping the team grounded in reality.

### Have Clearly Defined Roles

- While it is not strictly necessary to have titles & labels for every single role that members of your unit assume, everyone should know who is responsible for what. This helps minimize misunderstandings and assumptions.
- Teams can generate a lot of discussion and ideas, therefore it is important to have someone who can focus the group's creativity and, when necessary, bring the group back on point if it has followed a tangent for too long.
- Here are some important, archetypal roles that should be understood:
  - ✦ **Convener/Leader** (has the final say, keeps people on point)
  - ✦ **Communicator** (facilitates cooperation, exchange of information between and among team members)
  - ✦ **Challenger** (tries to bring alternative view points, plays "devil's advocate")
  - ✦ **Collaborator** (gets stuff done)
- Ultimately the question of what role you assign your people to comes down to skill sets and talents. Regardless of what specific set of roles you choose to utilize, the important thing is that everyone has a clear understanding of those roles and their relation to each other, and that there be some sense of accountability to make sure things get done well.

### A Shared Sense of Mission Unites a Group

- When a group of people are united in a well understood and shared purpose, everyone's productivity can increase as a result. When groups lack that shared identity - when the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing - productivity and morale plummet.





- When all the members of your team have bought in to the same mission, everyone becomes a part of a support network. People are more willing to help each other and a greater sense of trust and cooperation is fostered within the group. This is particularly beneficial when times of stress or crisis emerge - with everyone able to look to each other for guidance and support, fewer irrational or hasty decisions are made.
- The notion of "giving credit where credit is due" is important in any workplace, and teams of people that have all bought in to the same mission are more prone to share in each other's successes when the group's goals are reached.
- At the same time, it is always possible to have too much of a good thing. Sometimes attitudes and ways of thinking can become so alike within a team that the individual members of that team fall prey to 'groupthink.' This can arise due to a number of different circumstances:
  - ✦ When there is one particularly dominant personality within the group, especially if that person is in a position of authority, they can end up setting the tone and completely dominating the way the group approaches problems.
  - ✦ When there is too much emphasis on cohesion and avoiding conflict at all costs, the desire for harmony and conformity can drive people to fall into dysfunctional patterns of decision making, ultimately hampering creativity and discouraging individual responsibility.
  - ✦ When there is no one within the team who is assigned to play the role of Challenger (aka "devil's advocate") it is easy for ideas to go unchallenged and for groupthink to take hold.

## *Identifying Team Players Begins at Recruitment*

- If your unit tackles its challenges as a team, you want to make sure the people you bring on board are aligned with that style of working. There are a lot of questions that can be asked at the interview level that can reveal a lot about a person's mentality towards working in collaborations. Here are a few simple questions you can ask potential applicants:
  - ✦ "What role do you see yourself playing within a team?"
  - ✦ "What have people told you in the past they value in you as a team player?"
  - ✦ "How do you deal with conflict? How do you approach someone when you have an issue with them?"
  - ✦ "How do you prefer to be approached if someone has an issue with you?"
  - ✦ "Describe a situation when a team that you were part of encountered a major roadblock or setback... What did you do to overcome the resistance that you encountered?"

## *Communication is Crucial*

- Communication is central to making sure all members of a group understand both the over-arching goal of the unit, as well as the contributions expected of each team member.
- Regular group meetings allow everyone to reorient to the current status or level of progress of other members within the team, and move forward with a clear understanding of the big picture.
  - ✦ At the same time, meeting too often can hamper productivity and create an environment in which people feel they are being micromanaged. As always, striking a good balance is an important aspect of keeping lines of communication open and efficient.
- When smart and talented people come together, there are always going to be differences of opinion and conflicts that arise. Patient and level-headed communication is the best tool for resolving these kinds of situations, before they fester or boil over into something more serious.
- If your team has a reliable and well understood means of communicating - one which precludes assumption and leaves room for graceful self-correction - many conflicts can be diffused before they ever become an issue.

