



How to work in a team and the importance of teamwork

Together

Everyone

Achieves

More

Operating successfully as part of a team is one of the most important skills you can learn. It is not only an essential part of most working environments, but is a key component to the way we organise ourselves as human beings. We are not solitary creatures. Our families, our schools, our society at large could not function without collaboration and teamwork. We all rely on each other and we are all interconnected. Our advancement as a society rests on the fact that together everyone achieves more.

If you go to a job interview it is likely that at some point you will be asked whether you prefer to work on your own or as part of a team. The ideal candidate will usually be happy in either role, but it is worth thinking about what makes a good team player and how a team can function in order to achieve the best possible results. Teamwork requires a number of skills which are essential to whatever you are working on, whether you are running a small business, organising the national transport network, or putting on the local school play!

The best teams are structured in such a way that all necessary tasks are identified and everyone has a defined role and responsibility, working together to achieve a common

goal. Learning to cooperate with other people sometimes means that you might have to compromise on your personal wishes for the good of the group. It can be difficult if you find yourself alongside people with whom you have little in common, or who seem intent on pursuing their own aims: You cannot wear your ego “on your sleeve” when working in a team. Selfless cooperation is the only way that a team can function properly. This doesn’t mean that hard work should go unrecognised: the key to good team management is to make sure that ALL feel valued and each person plays to his or her strengths. Good communication is essential.

Qualities and roles for you to think about

1. **Communication:** Everyone on the team needs to know exactly what their role is and what is required of them. The team should try to meet regularly as a group and should keep each other informed of developments or potential problems.
2. **Collaboration/interdependence:** Successful teams are composed of individuals who should be prepared to talk to one another, sharing and “brainstorming” ideas. They need to be empathetic and mindful of one another. For e.g. if someone suggests a solution that is adopted by the team, they should be properly thanked and made to feel that their contribution has been noted and valued by other members. Listening is a key skill for everyone in the team. Knowing when to stop talking is also important!
3. **Trust:** The group should look after each other. If one person is struggling to fulfil their brief, they should be able to seek the support of their colleagues. This requires a level of trust and honesty between all members of the team. Teams function best when the members refrain from gossiping about each other and speak the truth tactfully but directly.
4. **Ability to prioritise:** Each member will have tasks to complete, but some will be more urgent than others. In order for the team to operate effectively everyone should be clear on the time scale and deadlines. This means that when problems arise they can be dealt with quickly and hopefully not affect the performance of the whole group.
5. **Respect:** All team members should respect each other, whatever their role within the group. Usually there is some sort of hierarchy and it is up to the team leader to set the

tone. Somebody usually needs to take ultimate responsibility for decisions, with an overall view. They are the point of contact if further direction is needed. However, this does not mean that other members of the group are less important – each person is needed for the task to be completed properly.

When you first start work, you do need to remember that other members of staff are more experienced than you and may have been doing the job for many years. You might want to wait a little before telling them that you think their methods are outdated or wasteful! If you do have ideas which could help productivity or make things run more smoothly, it might be sensible to jot them down for discussion with the group leader, before mentioning them in front of the whole team. Avoid undermining other team members – especially in public! The newcomer should also be prepared to get involved with every aspect of the work, including the most menial and mundane tasks. Remember that when you enter a new job your willingness to do what is required will count in your favour, even if you feel it's beneath your experience and qualifications. Most people should expect to start at the bottom and having experience of how the team functions from every perspective, will help you in the long run, especially if you end up in a leadership role.

Interview questions about teamwork:

If you are asked about teamwork at interview, do try to illustrate your qualities by answering the questions in the context of your own experiences. If you make a claim about yourself, for e.g. “I have excellent communication skills” or “I’m good at diffusing tension”, you should think of specific examples to illustrate this. This will not only show that you have thought about the relevant skills, but will also help to paint a detailed portrait of you and your qualities.

It might also be useful to have given some thought to the job you are applying for and how a team might function within that organisation. Are there particular qualities needed? If for e.g., you are applying to work in the healthcare profession, you may need to think about issues such as patient confidentiality and professional protocols. Make a list of the kind of issues which could be relevant and how they fit with your experience:

- Do they want team players who follow the lead and get the job done without a fuss?
- Do they want people who can contribute creative ideas?
- Are they looking for particular specialist skills within the team?
- Are your responsibilities likely to entail much solitary work? Will you need to take the initiative?

We have seen the importance of teamwork and the sort of qualities which may be required of team members. You might like to think of some times when you have shown these skills yourself. Below are some examples of the kinds of situations where people have had to show teamworking skills or have come across common problems related to working in a team.

1. Communication:

I was asked to make masks for the school play and agreed to it without realising what I'd taken on. I didn't have the guts to tell the teacher I was struggling to get them done and my school work was suffering. Eventually my friend suggested I email the teacher asking for a private meeting. Without having to face the whole group, I explained I couldn't cope and she really understood. She asked another couple of students to work with me in the art room and they helped me complete them on time. I wished I'd spoken out earlier.

We've got a new football coach and he's made such a difference to our team. He spends quite a bit of time briefing us before matches and now everyone has a very clear idea of what is expected of him. We are working better as a group and we aren't competing against each other anymore, but instead we're working together to win!

2. Collaboration:

I worked in a summer camp and the staff had a shared kitchen which was usually in a mess. There was one particular girl who always ended up cleaning it by herself. This meant she missed out on socialising in the evening and she was grumpy and self-righteous. One night I went to help her and discovered that she was really unhappy and

thinking of quitting the job. Together we made up a rota so that everyone took turns helping. Some of them grumbled at first, but in the end it worked really smoothly, and some of the best chats we had were over the kitchen sink!

I was part of a team organising a charity sale. One of the other members dominated the meetings and as a result some people felt very left out. In the end we spoke about this openly together and explained the problem to him. We decided to email our suggestions to the group leader beforehand, so that points could be dealt with more efficiently. As a result, everyone's voice was heard and the meetings didn't go on for quite so long.

3. Trust:

I was chatting with a friend about a class project and later that day she put forward the idea to the whole class, passing it off as if it were her own. At first I felt quite angry because the teacher was really impressed. But I decided not to say anything and just concentrate on the job in hand. It's really taught me the importance of relationships between the team members. I wouldn't particularly want to work with her again. However, the main thing is that we completed the assignment and it went really well.

4. Ability to prioritise:

A group of us were in charge of decorating the hall for our end of year prom. The decorations we'd ordered didn't arrive because there had been a manufacturing delay. We had an emergency meeting and re-allocated all the jobs so that we could put something together quickly and at minimal cost. I'm not saying the result was as spectacular as we'd hoped, but to be honest it looked great and I don't think anyone really noticed.

I had so much work to do when I was editing the school magazine and felt panicked that we'd miss the publication deadline. In the end I wrote down what needed doing in order of priority and got all the main stories together first. Once that was sorted, the rest seemed to fall into place quite quickly. I do think being organised really helps.

5. Respect:

It was my first day as part of a team working with disabled students at a riding school. Although I was meant to be one of the junior riding instructors, I seemed to spend most of my time cleaning the tack and mucking out the stables. I felt a bit disappointed until the head instructor came to find me. He explained that a member of staff had left unexpectedly and that he was really grateful to me for taking on her jobs at the last minute. He promised that we'd all take turns with the menial work until a suitable replacement could be found. Although the system wasn't ideal, we all helped each other and by the end of my time there I certainly felt like a valued member of the team.

I worked in a radio station as a student reporter. Each afternoon we had a post – production meeting to which everyone was invited. We were all actively encouraged to give out views about the output, from the cleaners and technicians to the journalists and presenters. I think our programmes appealed to people because so many different “voices” went into the process of putting them together.

For some years I've been chairman of a leadership training group. On one occasion I went to meet our regional youth leader who was arranging a public event later that day. We went through the running order together and then he apologised and said he needed to leave early. He explained that two of the cleaners had called in sick and so he had taken it upon himself to clean the hall where the event was due to take place. I immediately offered to go and help him. I was so impressed that despite being in charge, this young man was still prepared to “get his hands dirty” and do what needed to be done. In my book, that's the sign of a great leader and great team player.

For more help and experience of teamwork, think about arranging a work experience placement. See www.bussats.com/assets/workplacements.pdf.