Why Teams?

**GOALS**

- Understand advantages of the team approach to work.
- Grasp importance of “buy-in” for team effectiveness.
- Relate team concepts to your own work opportunities and challenges.

**Being on a work team is much like being on a sports team. No matter what your sports interest, you can learn much about leading and participating on a team in your company or school by reflecting on what you have experienced in baseball, basketball, football, soccer, volleyball, or other sport.**

Let’s take basketball, for example. On the court, five players form a team. One person, of course, could dribble the ball downcourt and shoot (making basketball a one-on-one sport similar to tennis singles), but the sport has evolved as a team endeavor for at least five reasons:

1. A team offers the possibility of more talent on the floor. All parts of the game move more quickly due to the specialized skills of individual players and the mutual cooperation of team members.

Imagine the limitations of one player compared to the team. That person would have to do it all, including jumping, shooting, rebounding, playing defense, and so forth. At least two disadvantages of this approach come to mind. First, the person probably cannot be equally good at each of those sports skills. A great rebounder, for example, is not often a great ball-handler or dribbler. Second, the player who tries to do it all quickly becomes exhausted.
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Let’s translate this basketball analogy into the practical world of business and other organizations. In business and school endeavors, you require a broad range of talent to understand problems, recognize opportunities, and carry on the many processes necessary to meet the organization’s goals. Even the smallest company needs someone adept at financial management, someone attuned to personnel recruitment and development, someone to oversee operations, someone who is good with the public and press, and yes, someone to sweep the floors at night. This team understands the importance of allowing each member to do his or her job. Team members are careful not to trespass unnecessarily onto one another’s job responsibilities. In short, they trust one another to carry out each of their specialized tasks. The company as a whole works well because each member of the team performs well.

**Insight 1**

The team approach brings together the specialized skills of many individuals to resolve problems, seize opportunities, and meet organizational goals.

**Your Turn**

Call to mind a team on which you served in business or school. List the specialized strengths of each of the team members. Was the team missing any particular skills it needed to reach its goals? If so, how did the team make up for this skill deficit?

2. Each player can count on backup in case of a stumble, a bad game, or an injury.

A team provides an insurance policy of sorts for unexpected interruptions and disabilities. Even when one of the team’s stars is unavailable for play, the concerted efforts of other team members can often make up the difference and achieve success.

In the same way, a team in a business or academic setting ensures that important goals can be met regardless of the ups and downs of individual team members. Too much is at stake in such environments to risk failure over one member’s sudden ill health, family emergency, job transfer, or other unexpected circumstances. The Broadway slogan for this ongoing effort continues to be, “The show must go on.” The cast—or team—pulls together to fulfill its mission even if key members are missing in action.

**Insight 2**

Teams provide a backup system that ensures continuity and mission fulfillment even if particular team members are unable to perform.
3. Individual eccentricities are tempered by the team for the good of the game.
   In basketball, some players love to shoot the ball. Even when they miss repeatedly, they try and try again. If their failure to consistently make baskets begins to harm the team’s efforts and success, team members take it upon themselves to change the “ball-hog’s” behavior. When the team refuses to pass the ball to the ball-hog, the message comes through loud and clear: Quit shooting all the time and become more of a team player. In this way, individual idiosyncrasies are suppressed for the good of the team effort.

   Similarly, on business and school teams, the wild ideas of some team members get tested by the judgment and experience of the rest of the team. If the team as a whole rejects the wild ideas of one member, those ideas usually fade away and play no role in the eventual report, project, or other activity developed by the team. This self-censoring function of teams is a valuable aid to upper management. Without the idea filters naturally provided by teams, upper management could easily face a plethora of documents, all written by individuals, and all expressing highly individual ideas about company problems and opportunities. It would then be the difficult task of upper management to sift through the set of often bizarre ideas in search of a few that made sense. Teams take much of this burden from upper management by squelching unworkable ideas from the outset.

Insight 3

Peer pressure on teams operates to enforce common sense judgments and ideas. Extreme or impractical ideas are usually rejected by the team before such ideas find their place in the work output of the team.

Your Turn

Think about a time when a time when a team on which you served was “left in the lurch” by the sudden absence of one of the key members of the team. Did your team survive this change? If so, how did your team compensate for the missing member? What was the ultimate result?

4. Motivation increases as team members take pride in one another and try not to let each other down.
   When members of a basketball team win their league championship, they do not come to the microphone to speak about “motivation from my million dollar salary” or
“special treatment I was given by the coach.” Instead, they almost always talk about the inspiration they received from their teammates; the effort all members made so as not to let each other down; and the powerful influence each member felt by seeing other team members working so hard for victory.

That same kind of team motivation occurs in business and school environments. When a meeting is called for 9:00 A.M., you try to be on time, not merely because your boss expects promptness, but because you respect the time of your fellow team members. You do not want them sitting around waiting for you to arrive. When an approaching deadline requires that the team work late, you do your part in seeing the project through to completion. You are willing to go the extra mile not only because you want the project to be successful, but because you do not want to let your teammates down.

This is not to say that we automatically become close friends with all team members we serve with over the course of a business or academic career. Some team members don’t earn our respect and it is hard to feel much obligation, responsibility, or liking for them. But other team members—perhaps the majority we encounter—are hard-working, well-intentioned coworkers with whom we feel bonds of camaraderie. In these cases, a significant factor in our motivation to do a good job and see the project through to success stems directly from our feelings toward other team members. Esprit d’corps on a team, in fact, can be one of the most powerful motivators in professional life.

### Insight 4

Teams whose members respect and like one another gain the advantage of motivation internal to the team. Members of the team want to perform not only for external rewards, but for the internal rewards of partnership, mutual respect, and friendship engendered within the team.

### Your Turn

Recall a team made up of people you liked and admired. How did these positive feelings toward other team members influence your performance on that team? Would you have performed differently if you had little liking or admiration for your fellow team members?

5. The task of beating the opponent requires the combined talents of five players.

Finally, teams are required in sports because opponents are strong and shrewd. In other words, external challenges have much to do with the necessity for forming teams. In the case of basketball, it would be folly for a single player to go up against an opposing team of five players. Teams form in response to the challenges they face.

Let’s take business examples of this same principle. If the “opponent” to a new product is millions of consumers who don’t know about the product, a company wisely assembles a marketing team to take on this significant challenge. If a competitor comes out with a similar product to your own but priced considerably less, your company will probably act quickly to put together a response team made up of representatives from
marketing, research and development, accounting, operations, and other specialities to determine how this challenge can be met and overcome.

**Insight 5**

Powerful challenges must be met by powerful responses. Such power often comes in the form of a talented, motivated team.

**Your Turn**

Remember a time when your company or school organization faced a significant challenge or problem and, in response, formed a team on which you served. In what ways was the membership of the team determined by the nature of the challenge or problem? In your opinion, were members well chosen for the responsibilities they had to perform? How successfully was the challenge or problem met by the team?

**TEAMS AND BUY-IN**

In the best of all worlds, companies would be made up of individuals, work groups, departments, and divisions all equally committed to reaching common company goals. In such a world, the head of finance would not mind giving up 50 percent of his or her department’s budget if that sacrifice would help the marketing department do a better job for the company.

Anyone who has worked even a few days in an organization of any size quickly realizes that politics play a major role in determining the behavior of individuals and groups. The head of finance, for example, probably had to battle long and hard against other department heads for his or her share of the company budget. He or she will battle even harder to keep other departments from taking his or her budgeted money or otherwise intruding on his or her turf. In many companies, work groups and departments seem to be more concerned with their own growth and financial support than with the overall welfare of the company. This competition for resources pits all divisions in the company against one another in an ongoing political wrangle that consumes enormous energy and attention.

In such a political minefield, the steps and missteps of one division alone may be doomed to disaster. “That’s a report from marketing,” the head of accounting may bluster. “They’ve skewed everything to support their own needs.” The head of marketing may be just as suspicious of any data or other information sent forward exclusively from accounting. How does business get done in such a charged environment where the left hand doesn’t trust what the right hand is doing?

The simple answer is teams. By assembling representatives from the various political entities within the company, upper management ensures that the work product of the team will be generally acceptable to all company members. “After all,” the head of marketing explains, “we had one of our people on that team. Our interests were represented.” Other department or division heads feel similarly. In short, the buy-in assured
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by the membership of the team extends to its work product. A report from the team, for example, will be greeted with much more credibility by the company as a whole simply because that document arose from the combined efforts of somewhat opposed interests.

**Insight 6**

Even though teams and teamwork may be more cumbersome and time-consuming than individual action, the team approach may nevertheless be justified, in large part, for the buy-in it facilitates in politically charged organizational environments.

**Your Turn**

Think about a time when you served on a team made up of individuals representing different and perhaps opposed interests within the company or organization. Was it difficult for the team to make decisions? If so, why? Did the team complete its work? If so, was that work widely accepted by the company or organization?

**TEAMS AND CENSORSHIP, PRO AND CON**

As discussed earlier, a team provides an early-warning system and an effective suppression mechanism for member ideas judged by the team to be impractical or outlandish. Filtering out such ideas at an early stage saves money and organizational energy. Imagine the damage a wrong-headed idea could do if allowed to proceed forward in the development of a project or other company activity.

On the other hand, teams must exercise caution that they do not become guilty of what Harvard Professor Irving Janis has called GroupThink. This phenomenon occurs when a group refuses to hear ideas or information in conflict with the majority opinion. The group may put too much stock in the strength-in-unity notion, to the point that all dissent is ridiculed or angrily dismissed. Influential group members may urge other team members to adhere to the party line for the sake of group harmony.

Perhaps the classic case study of GroupThink occurred at Morton Thiokol Corporation in the days just prior to the *Challenger* disaster. Although one engineer, Roger Beaujolais, raised serious concerns about the safety of “O”-ring functions at low temperatures, his dissent was discounted by Morton Thiokol project managers and ignored by NASA administrators. These managers and administrators felt pressure from their superiors and from the press, including Dan Rather’s reporting on the nightly news, to launch the often-delayed shuttle. Safety concerns aroused by the “O”-ring matter did not fit in with NASA’s overarching agenda. The team in this case squelched dissenting information that could have saved the mission as well as the lives of the astronauts involved.

GroupThink can be prevented in teams by getting all members to agree to several procedural guidelines:

- Rules of order (such as Robert’s Rules of Order) should not be used to silence dissenting opinions. Rules or Order, of course, can prove useful in organizing effective team interactions at meetings. But the point here is not to let rules crowd out or stifle the opinions and perspectives of team members.
• Pressure for consensus should not be applied in such a way as to prevent the expression of minority perspectives.
• Each team member should be a critical evaluator of team processes. In doing so, team members must call attention to symptoms of GroupThink that occur during team discussion.
• The team leader must not impose a preordained perspective or foregone conclusion on group members.
• The group must welcome outside information and opinion, especially when such input disagrees with the dominant direction of team discussion.

Insight 7

In suppressing worthless and impractical ideas, the team must be careful not also to suppress valuable dissent.

Your Turn

Bring to mind a time when you or another team member disagreed strongly with the direction of discussion and decision making taken by your team. How was that disagreement presented? How did other team members respond? What finally happened?

TEAMS AND CROSS-TRAINING

An additional defense of teams arises from the need for cross-training in organizations of all kinds. When specialists gather as members of a team, a certain amount of cross-fertilization takes place. Like actors in a play, each team member learns at least a portion of the “lines” of other team members. For example, an advertising specialist on the team shares his or her approach to product marketing with the human resources (HR) representative. Even though the HR representative does not then become an instant expert on advertising, he or she nevertheless has important insights into the art of advertising and can add to discussion and decision making on the topic. If the advertising team member had to miss a meeting, others on the team would be able to carry on, thanks to their cross-training.

Companies and other organizations maximize the contributions of their employees by such cross-training. Especially in economically stressed times, companies may not have the luxury of hiring specialists as needed for every project underway in the company. Upper managers must rely on employees to use not only their first areas of expertise, but also their background knowledge in secondary areas (achieved through cross-training) to keep projects on target and on time.

Cross-training within teams can be facilitated in at least two ways:

• Take regular cross-training breaks from usual team activities. For example, you can devote an hour every few meetings exclusively for sharing core aspects of each member’s expertise and techniques. Rather than overloading any one meeting with too much cross-training data, one or two team members can share their
perspectives and knowledge at each cross-training occasion. Put in common terms, a cross-training session can be labeled, “How to Think Like a . . . (marketing, finance, operations, etc.).”

- The team can invite outside experts to visit team meetings with the goal of sharing techniques, skills, and concepts as an upgrade to the existing knowledge and skill base of team members.

### Insight 8

Cross-training makes each team member more valuable to the team and ensures against knowledge and skill gaps during the life of the team.

### Your Turn

If you have received valuable cross-training as a part of your membership on a team, tell about that cross-training and how you used it. If you have not received cross-training in this way, write briefly about the kind of cross-training you would like to receive and how it could help you contribute to the team.

### TEAMS AND FOLLOW-UP RESPONSIBILITIES

Like most assemblies of individuals, a team has a life span ranging from a matter of days to several years. No matter how long the team survives, someone must remain active and available as its spokesman, interpreter, and perhaps defender. Here’s an example of follow-up responsibilities after a retailing team finished its work. Someone had to

- present team findings to several levels of management
- draw together team documents, data, and meeting notes
- answer questions about what the team decided, meant, suspected, and recommended
- meet with other teams who wanted to learn from the success of the previous team or continue its work in some way

Although these duties often fall to the team leader, they can be assumed by other team members. A high-performing team can distribute these follow-up responsibilities among its members partly to lighten the load on the team leader and partly to prevent team history from being rewritten in the retelling by just one member.

### Insight 9

The work of a team is not over after the team’s last meeting. Many important follow-up responsibilities can be distributed among team members.
Finally, teams have the advantage of being more enjoyable than most work accomplished all alone. Here’s the opinion of one manager in the computer industry after a six-month period of service on a six-member team within her company.

We met at least once a week. Even though we didn’t know one another before our first meeting, we quickly gelled into a comfortable and stimulating work group. I looked forward to seeing my teammates each week for at least four reasons. First, I wanted to find out how their individual portion of our work was going. Second, I needed perceptive people to hear about the work I had accomplished and give me meaningful feedback. Third, we all needed other people with whom to share our joys and frustrations about the project. Finally, we just got along as people. Although we didn’t spend a lot of time on social talk, there was the inevitable chat about kids, pets, hobbies, life stresses, good restaurants, interesting movies, and so forth. For all those reasons, I found team membership much more energizing and fulfilling than simply laboring away by myself in my cube.

Social aspects of teamwork are particularly evident in messages passed among team members on MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Ning, and other social networking sites. Even when the message at hand contains a kernel of business information, it usually also includes a social gesture or comment of some kind—a bit of humor, a friendly or teasing comment, or a response to a recent posting by the message recipient. This is all to say that the social dimensions of belonging to a team extend far beyond actual face-to-face meetings to the many additional contacts, including texting, made possible by Internet connections and the telephone.

**Insight 10**

Most people have a natural tendency to seek out the company of others. This tendency can help to make teamwork more motivating and fulfilling than the same work undertaken alone.
Your Turn

Compare a time when you accomplished a project or task by yourself with a time when you accomplished a similar project or task as a member of a team. Which form of work was most fulfilling to you? Which was most efficient? Why?

Summing Up

Teams offer many advantages as an organized way to accomplish tasks. First, work teams have all the positive qualities of sports teams in extending available expertise, coordinating knowledge and resources, and utilizing internal modes of motivation. Second, teams provide a means of achieving buy-in in politically charged work environments, where opposing interests may resist accepting the work product of any one constituency in the organization. Third, teams act to censor worthless ideas before they negatively influence the development of decisions and projects. Fourth, teams encourage cross-training, with resulting advantages to the company in case particular specialists are unavailable. Fifth, teams provide more people to handle follow-up responsibilities than in work accomplished by a single individual. Finally, teams are often fun work experiences. Such enjoyment and satisfaction promotes employee loyalty, motivation, and commitment. A wide variety of electronic connections made possible by social networking sites and cell phones have increased the social aspects and advantages of belonging to a team. More than ever, teamwork is considered more enjoyable by most employees than “lone contributor” work.