



Characteristics of Effective Teams

By following the tips below, you'll go a long way toward creating a team that works together more effectively—and pleasantly.

1. Respond Appropriately to Others

People often assume in meetings that “silence means agreement,” but this is a destructive norm. When others fail to respond, the speaker doesn't know whether people:

- Didn't understand the remark,
- Understood it and agreed with it,
- Understood it but disagreed with it,
- Understood it but thought it was irrelevant.



Instead, show an active interest as members make comments or ask questions. This results in a meeting full of a sense of positive energy and involvement.

Plops: You have probably said something in a meeting only to see the group continue on as if nothing had been said. This is called a PLOP! When members' ideas are plopped (ignored), the consequences are scattered discussion, repetition, and little progress toward accomplishing the group's agenda.

It can be useful to adopt a groundrule like: “Be direct about your opinions and state them out loud during the meeting.” Stop the meeting periodically and check everyone's opinion before proceeding further with the task at hand.

2. Clarification Precedes Evaluation

Unfortunately, these two are reversed in most meetings. Judgments are made about the subject before members fully understand what they're discussing. Effective work groups regularly check in to make sure everyone understands the speaker's meaning, before agreeing or disagreeing with a statement.

The question, “What is it?” should come before asking “How do we feel about it?” That way, understanding has a chance to happen first and potentially good ideas are not prematurely killed. Nor are members as likely to feel rejected as individuals.

Effective groups also frequently paraphrase or summarize what the speaker said to make sure they understand the contribution before trying to evaluate it. When a large conflict is looming, the meeting convener should call for – or offer – such a summary of the issues.

3. Speak for Yourself

Accept responsibility for your own remarks. Do not mislead yourself or others by offering opinions on “what we should do” that are really the opinions of the boss or some other authority.

Also avoid the temptation to build a case that supports your own opinion by referring to some vague “they” or “the experts” or “most people”. Instead, say “I think...” or “In my experience. . .” Take care to avoid the impression that you are speaking for others. They can speak for themselves!

Now, this runs headlong into the political or representative idea of speaking, but if you speak for someone who is not present, there is little opportunity for a meaningful give-and-take discussion. State your own ideas as your own.

4. Separate the Idea from the Person

Ideas belong to the group. Once an opinion is expressed or a proposal is made, try to identify the topic as group property. Make sure it is not "Mary's idea on ..." but "The proposal on ...".

An excellent way to remove an idea from the presenter is by using a flip chart easel. Putting the idea on a common space – the easel pad – allows members to refer to the idea apart from who said it. This frees people to present an idea, and then join in the discussion without feeling the need to defend themselves personally.

5. All Members Participate

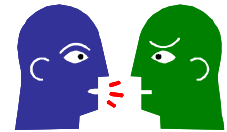
Group members need not always participate in the same way, but they must keep actively involved in helping the group move along. For example, when someone is providing information, others make sure it is understood and organized by identifying points of agreement and disagreement.

The goal is for members to fulfill whatever task is appropriate to keep things working. Instead of tuning out during a discussion that doesn't strongly interest you, you could take an active stance by performing one of these important group process roles.

6. Be Conscious of Group Processes

Whenever the group senses it is having trouble making progress on a task, try to find the reason and correct it. This group process is just as important as the task itself. Sometimes the reasons are process difficulties. A few symptoms of process trouble are:

- Excessive hair-splitting,
- Points repeated over and over,
- Suggestions that "plop,"
- Private conversations in subgroups,
- Two or three people dominating the discussion,
- Members taking sides and refusing to compromise,
- Attacking ideas before they are fully expressed or understood, and
- Apathetic participation.



When symptoms like these occur, change gears. Stop working on the task and work on the process. Try to see the problem as belonging to the group. Correction can be sought with introductory statements like:

"We seem to be bogged down..." or

"I'm hearing us repeat ourselves, so let's..."

The goal is to correct the group's problem and to keep things working, not to punish or blame a supposed offender.

7. Avoid Decisions by Default

Choose to make your decisions openly rather than allowing decisions to be made by default. When a group faces an issue, it has only three options:

- Openly agree to take an action.
- Openly agree *not* to take action.
- Decide-by-default to take no action.

To decide nothing by default has the same impact on the problem as an openly-declared decision to take no action. But, default decisions are felt as failures by group members and tend to create tension. The group retains more goodwill by openly agreeing not to act than by simply not acting because they couldn't agree.

You can also reduce stress by viewing each decision as temporary, something to be carried out, evaluated, and modified in light of experience. Decisions need not be all-or-nothing or assumed to last forever.

In summary, effective groups decide **openly** how to decide. Decisions may be made by vote, coin toss, delegation, or complete consensus. The crucial factor is that the group agrees openly on how it will decide, rather than letting no-action decisions be made by default.

8. View Conflict as Necessary and Helpful

This rule of thumb may be the hardest. However, effective teams realize that conflict is inevitable. They know the choice is theirs whether conflict will be open (subject to group control) or disguised (out of control). *Which would you rather have?*

An example of disguised conflict might be a group trying to arrive at a consensus decision, but one or more members are so locked-in they can't hear or participate effectively.

The benefits of openly discussing issues far outweigh any temporary tension that might result from such honest discussion. For one, it clears the air. For another, it gets things out on the table where they can be seen. Then people can explore all the facts, rationale, and feelings behind the conflict.

The result? Better decisions.

Effective work groups adopt the position that there are no problem members. Behaviors that hinder their effectiveness are a group problem. A person who continually introduces irrelevant ideas, for example, can only get a group off-topic if other members follow the lead. A wise group will ask why it has allowed itself to get off the topic. Perhaps the digressions are a way to avoid the open conflict that might otherwise occur.

Likewise, the person who jokes or talks too much, attacks others, or never participates represents a group problem.

You can eliminate these disruptions by giving helpful information to your members about the impact of their actions; but do not analyze, dissect, or work them over.

You'll know if your group has a problem when subgroups begin holding meetings in hallways or parking lots; when the conflicts, differences, and clearly expressed ideas happen *outside* and not *during* the meetings. That's the time to get conflict back where it belongs, and where it can do the group some good.

Good luck! ■

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