

Teaching Tips for Teamwork Skills

To enhance students' employability, it is important that they are provided with the opportunity to not only work in teams, but to develop the kinds of skills that will help create a cohesive and efficient team.

Few professions allow for work to occur in isolation, so the ability to collaborate and contribute effectively in a team environment is highly valued by employers.

The Carnegie Foundation claims that personal qualities account for 85 percent of the factors contributing to job success and, according to the Harvard Bureau of Vocational Guidance, 66 percent of people fired from their jobs were fired because they failed to get along with people.

Characteristics

People who are effective team members are:

- good collaborators,
- good communicators,
- reliable contributors,
- open-minded,
- non-judgemental,
- sensitive to cross-cultural differences,
- able to adapt their behaviour to suit different roles and situations, and
- adept at providing constructive support and feedback to others.

There are many aspects to teamwork, so it may be useful to identify a key focus for your unit – what one thing do you really want students to be able to do at the end of your unit in relation to teamwork? A few suggestions are offered below.

- Share knowledge and resources with others
- Coordinate activities with others
- Critically evaluate own teamwork skills
- Provide specific, actionable feedback sensitively to others
- Handle differences between team members sensitively
- Communicate respectfully in team situations

Remember to include teamwork in learning outcomes and assessment marking criteria to demonstrate clearly to students that the process of working in teams is valued, not only the product.

Evidence of teamwork skills

The extent to which an individual's teamwork skills are developed is evidenced by their behaviour. The following list of behaviours can be used by the lecturer or by students themselves before and during a teamwork project to guide behaviour, as well as for final assessment. In meetings a good team member:

- participates enthusiastically in discussion;
- expresses him/herself clearly and coherently;

- introduces new ideas;
- builds constructively on the ideas of others;
- influences the direction and nature of the discussion;
- listens carefully to other members' views;
- quietens a dominant interrupter to allow someone else to make a point;
- makes decisions collaboratively; and
- discriminates clearly between the important and the trivial.

Teaching tips for various stages of the project

It is important for students to know that teams don't just form and immediately start working together to accomplish great things. Tuckman (1965) described the following stages of team growth and suggested that teams must be given time to work through the stages to become effective.

1. **Forming.** When a team is forming, members cautiously explore the boundaries of acceptable group behaviour. During this stage students should be encouraged to review and share previous experiences before developing a team contract. The contract should include communication protocols, individual contributions and roles, timelines and other issues that were articulated during the discussion of previous experiences.
2. **Storming.** At this early stage team members are often struggling with unfamiliar and challenging work and are inexperienced at working together. As a result they may focus energy on each other instead of their work. During this stage students can be encouraged to refocus on their goals and review their contract and timelines. Lecturer guidance can be crucial at this stage, perhaps offering decision making tools and strategies to resolve conflict.
3. **Norming.** During this stage team members accept the team and begin to reconcile differences. Progress can be accelerated by explicitly attending to listening skills, raising awareness of intra and interpersonal skills, reviewing time management skills and practising summarising and clarifying skills.
4. **Performing.** By this stage the team members have discovered and accepted each other's strengths and weaknesses, and learned what their roles are. As the work comes together students could be encouraged to explicitly reflect on what worked and what didn't – for them individually and for the team as a whole – so that lessons can be learned and skills improved for the future.

If teams are to work on one large project throughout the semester, then the project needs to be broken into smaller assignments that have to be handed in throughout the semester, so students can get a sense of how the team is doing. Feedback (and eventually grading) should be on both the work accomplished and the group processes that allowed it to happen.

Teaching tips for team meetings

When students are inexperienced at structured teamwork, or have had unsatisfactory experiences in the past, scaffolding team meetings in class can be very beneficial. The suggestions below are clustered around meeting stages:

1. Opening discussion
 - state different perceptions of what the task really is What resources will be required (time, money, assistance)? What costs will be incurred?

- legitimise - show an understanding of how others see the problem
 - brainstorm ideas – at this stage all ideas are encouraged and accepted
 - propose some potential solutions
 - ask each individual for a possible solution
 - list available resources
2. Narrowing down the solutions
- look for redundant and overlapping ideas
 - separate solutions based on “pros/cons”
 - categorise solutions
 - make sure solutions address the issues
 - discuss and agree on criteria for evaluating solutions
 - evaluate solutions using agreed criteria
3. Closing discussion
- clearly articulate agreed consensus
 - clearly articulate follow-up actions for each team member (including timelines).

Since working as part of a team can improve learning and is a much needed skill in today’s workplace, some team exercises should be included in the classroom. With well planned out tasks, careful guidance, and close observation, instructors can make team exercises extremely valuable learning experiences.

Teaching tips for virtual teams

Communication in the virtual environment has some challenges as team interactions are filtered by both technology and culture. For example, nonverbal communications are often limited when compared to the typical face-to-face team meetings.

Zaugg & Davies (2013) identified three components to developing soft skills that facilitated stronger virtual team member interactions: the choice and use of virtual communication tools, the refinement of communication skills, and the scheduling of time to build trusting relationships.

Choice of virtual communication tools

- More media-rich communication tools facilitate greater team interactions and promote stronger team relationships - the greater the media richness the more verbal and non-verbal information can be sent.
- Document-sharing using cloud technology can meet the desired criteria of accessibility and compatibility with team meeting interactions. Arranging for the common sharing of documentation prior to team meetings can facilitate team interactions during the meetings.
- Combining audio, video, text, document-sharing and screen-sharing technologies helps to convey messages more clearly.

Refinement of virtual communication skills

Remind students to:

- either avoid use of idiomatic or vernacular phrases, or use them judiciously and explain them;
- paraphrase what was discussed to ensure clear understanding;
- ask for clarification if another team member’s message is not quite clear;

- pause after making statements so that listeners can ask questions;
- be prepared to explain views in different ways;
- enunciate words clearly, and use text to support communication of unclear words or phrases;
- allow time for comments to be digested and appropriate responses to be formed;
- ensure everyone on the team has an opportunity to contribute and respond – actively seek out the opinion of those who have said nothing;
- acknowledge the contributions of others; and
- share key documents prior to team meetings.

Building virtual team relationships

Encourage virtual student teams to:

- schedule time before and/or after meetings for team members to just ‘visit’ and get to know each other;
- share visuals such as photos of themselves, pets, favourite places or foods; and
- include video where possible so that body language can be observed, at least to some extent.

Useful web links

- [Griffith University’s Teamwork Skills Toolkit](#) contains a number of teamwork activities and pro-forma’s that are ready to use with students. The Toolkit is accessible from the Graduate Attributes web page.
- Colorado State University provides resources on [Teaching Teamwork Skills](#) that include: assigning students to teams; providing training in teamwork skills; structuring assignments so students must work together, giving feedback; communicating the message that teamwork skills are important; and providing a mechanism for reflection.
- [The University of Waterloo’s Teamwork Skills](#) page includes strategies to encourage students to develop a healthy team climate and strategies to encourage students to develop an effective team process. Reflective questionnaires about climate and process are available for student use. The web page also includes an “Are we a team?” checklist.

References

Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, 384-399.

Zaugg, H. and Davies, R. S. (2013). Communication skills to develop trusting relationships on global virtual engineering capstone teams, *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 38(2), 228-233.

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