

Teamwork With 3 Teams

TEAM STORY

I worked for a small company where one of the senior employees ridiculed the workers. He would shout criticisms across the office at employees and team members, even when they weren't involved in his projects. When he came in each morning, the office would stop talking – no one wanted to give him an opening into a conversation. The executives and managers were aware of his behavior but said they felt powerless to do anything about it. When I asked about the problem, they stated that many employees had left the firm because of his obnoxious behavior, including the person I replaced.

This story shows how some workers behave, and why some teams lack teamwork and struggle to perform effectively. At this company, it was difficult to focus or be productive, because it was a tense and dysfunctional place to work. As we'll soon discover, teamwork and teams cover a range of functionality and productivity.

TEAMWORK AND TEAMS

If you're wondering what real teamwork is about, here is a simple description: *Teamwork is people working together using cooperation to accomplish a goal.* Notice the key point—using cooperation to accomplish a goal. Many workers and managers believe they have teamwork, though in my experience, real teamwork is rare. Real teamwork is a positive and ongoing activity. It is inclusive and dynamic, not static or fixed. "Talking the teamwork talk" means little if there is no doing, no "walking the teamwork walk." However, when teamwork is a cultural norm, everyone in an organization will benefit and become more productive.

As for teams, teams are groups that are built around consistent teamwork, and they have grown in popularity for several reasons:

1. A team can turn out more work in less time than separate individuals.
2. A team can keep work moving forward even when a member is out (at meetings, out sick, on vacation, etc.).
3. A team can share and coordinate work tasks, input, and output.
4. A team can maintain consistent quality and performance, especially when it combines the necessary skills, organization, and goals.
5. A team can be self-managing if it is empowered to be.
6. A team can be flexible: short-term or long-term with various goals and objectives depending on the changing needs of the workplace.

In short, teams are a valuable solution for many companies, but management competence and skill are essential for real team performance.

Quick Note: You may wonder, how many does it take to make a team? One definition of a “team” came from using 2 or more horses or other animals to pull a plow or wagon. I have worked on 2-person teams, and when those 2 people use teamwork and follow team principles, they are a team. Logically then, every ongoing work relationship between 2 or more people can be a team.

Productive teams are built around consistent teamwork and constructive relationships. In my experience, teamwork and team development are largely dependent on the degree of interactive skill among the members. Therefore, teams can range from

minimally functional to high performing. Whether or not your workplace has teams, the following overview will be helpful because the 3 teams exemplify degrees of teamwork. They differ in their development and sophistication, and the examples will help improve everyone's understanding of teamwork and teams, including their awesome potential for peak performance. As you read these team descriptions, compare your team and teamwork skills. Which description is the closest match?

1. THE MOCK TEAM

The most elementary team is the *Mock Team*. The word "mock" is for imitation, because this type of team only *appears* to be a team—it does not function like one. A simple definition of the Mock Team is "Two or more people who are together for some purpose." However, if those involved have little experience in team or group activities, they will probably struggle to achieve their purpose and goals. Without enough training or skill, people new to a team environment tend to focus too much on their own identity and agenda. They often act from too much self-interest, i.e., "What's in it for *me*?"

For example, some members may want to satisfy a need for personal power—to be in charge. Some may want to work with members they perceive as attractive or sexy. Some may get involved to compete with other team members. Some may want to join a particular team because they want to have more fun.

Other inappropriate personality-driven agendas can also arise. The problem with these personal agendas is that team members aren't focused on the *team's* goals. Mock Teams have a weak foundation, a lack of teamwork and interactive skill, and a fuzzy sense of cohesion.

The inherent differences between the members (personality, background, attitudes, etc.) can easily become a source of division and disagreement. When things go wrong, frustration levels will escalate, and members will tend to blame each other for problems

and mistakes. Survival of the group as a whole is not perceived as a goal and their cohesion can break down easily.

With an inexperienced group like this, members often try to avoid responsibility for problems and win *within* the group. But winning at the expense of other team members is detrimental to teamwork—it will increase resentment and conflict. When the newness of the group wears off (usually after a few weeks or so), criticism and blame often increase while achievements are rarely recognized. Important teamwork issues and frustrations are usually avoided or ignored until small gripes grow into larger disputes.

Typically, this group will have a manager who lacks the skill and experience to be a competent leader and team player. He or she might use an autocratic or authoritarian style to the detriment to the team. Such a manager will rarely ask for feedback or care what other members think. This kind of manager will struggle to be an effective leader, and the group will often lack appropriate communication, collaboration, organization, and goals. For example, the autocratic managers in the previous chapters didn't practice teamwork. They weren't team players or effective leaders; their domineering style was poorly suited for teamwork or team building.



Groups who behave this way represent a Mock Team. They may appear to be a team and may be called a team, but they do not *function* as a team. They struggle to get their work done efficiently and don't survive over time because their productivity is disrupted by competition and conflict. Their low-trust interactions and lack of teamwork lead to higher turmoil and member turnover. An example is an inexperienced group that comes together or is chosen for a project but that acts too much like a me-centered, competitive, and conflicted family to be efficient and productive. Unfortunately, I've worked on many teams like this. They are frustrating, poor performing, and prone to failure.

Quick Note: Contrast this Mock Team with team phrases, such as "team spirit," "a team player," "for the good of the team," and "a winning team," and you'll understand how far off base a Mock Team is.

2. THE TRANSITION TEAM

A more developed team is the *Transition Team*. This team is making a transition from a Mock Team to one with a greater sense of purpose and identity. The individuals begin to de-emphasize their own agendas and focus more on the *group's* identity by applying their individual talents and skills toward the team and its goals. They begin to suppress their competitive attitudes. They have some understanding that the "What's in it for me?" approach is disruptive to the performance and cohesion of the group. Their interactions demonstrate an understanding that their relationships are important. They have a greater focus on teamwork—they're more cooperative and less competitive.

Transition Team members tend to do more things for each other because they have broadened their focus from what *I* want. When things go wrong, they try to manage the competitive *win within* drive—although these members will still tend to blame each other for problems and mistakes. With this team, there might be

occasional recognition of what *has* been achieved, though recognition is not yet the team's cultural norm. The Transition Team can be more skilled at handling gripes and problems but they tend to be inconsistent. Some problems are ignored and evolve into larger conflicts.

A more skilled manager or leader can enable a Transition Team to be more communicative, collaborative, and organized. They can encourage more focus and efficiency than a Mock Team. However, the manager still leans toward the authoritarian style, with all of its non-team qualities.

The Transition Team tends to swing back to separate and individual agenda's when things go awry. When problems arise and pressures build (as they always do), Transition Team members often revert to finger pointing and scapegoating. Groups like this can be more productive than a Mock Team in their output, and they can survive for longer periods, but their efforts are weakened by their inconsistency. They have too many of the self-defeating and competitive behaviors found in a Mock Team.

An example of a Transition Team is a family, committee, or other organizational team that needs more training, experience, and guidance to really excel. They are only about halfway to being productive and successful.

3. THE PEAK PERFORMANCE TEAM

The *Peak Performance Team* is a much higher-level team in its functioning and performance. This team has a strong sense of teamwork, commitment, and purpose, and the *group's identity and goals are preeminent*. These team members have an intrinsic understanding that their effectiveness and survival are built on each member's cooperation and collaboration, not their competition. Their interactions are consistently more positive and mutually respectful.

Peak Performance Team members understand the importance of building consensus. They emphasize areas of agreement rather than areas of conflict during discussions and meetings. Then, they build on those areas of agreement to work through problems and create solutions that everyone can support. They often use *we* to acknowledge their group identity, ownership, and responsibility during team interactions. The Peak Performance Team understands that the positive and constructive quality of the members' *relationships* is the key to their success.

This team has a bond that is built on shared experience, not just the completion of work tasks. This bond is based on tolerance and respect for their inherent differences, and a commitment to each other and their team—a bond critical for the team's long-term success and performance.

Because their relationships are built on a constructive level, they handle gripes and problems more effectively. They avoid scapegoating because they know that behavior creates resentment and division. Mistakes are de-emphasized and these team members “own their own” by taking responsibility for their mistakes. Team cohesion is recognized as a key to the group's survival, so problems that could break their cohesion are handled efficiently.

- “How can *we* solve this problem?” is a typical expression of the Peak Performance Team.

Peak Performance team members participate in discussions and decisions, and management encourages their feedback. This improves the team's cohesion, integration, and performance. The members identify *with* their group, resulting in a strong team identity. In fact, a *strong team identity* is a critical factor that differentiates a Peak Performance Team from a Mock or Transition Team.

Another keystone of a Peak Performance Team's success is their continued focus on work that *has* been achieved rather than

emphasizing problems or mistakes. That's because Peak Performance Team members understand that errors or mistakes of fellow members are rarely intentional. They realize that mistakes will happen and the team can work through their problems and continue to move forward toward their established goals and objectives.

The leader of this developed team has the skill and understanding to be a stable guide and collaborator. He or she understands that an autocratic approach is too exclusionary and the management of the team will be shared by the members whenever possible—members are involved in planning, decisions, and implementation. This more interactive approach keeps the leadership and the team members connected on a daily basis.

This leader/manager understands the importance and value of open communication, so gripes, misunderstandings, and problems are handled quickly. This leader encourages collaboration and feedback. They want to know how the team is performing from the *members'* point of view. They stay involved with the team's issues, work output, quality, and progress. This leader/manager is a source of positive interaction and recognition of what *has* been achieved. He or she also helps the group focus on the value of *proactive* short-term and long-term planning and organization.

Quick Note: For some managers, accountability is a major part of defining a team's performance. However, team accountability is unrealistic with Mock and Transition Teams because they lack sufficient teamwork and functionality. Accountability comes more naturally with Peak Performance Teams—they have a higher level of involvement, functionality, and achievement.

Team members will tend to *flourish* in the Peak Performance Team environment. Their positive, constructive relationships encourage respect, cohesion, and consistent performance on a daily and long-term basis. The Peak Performance Team can survive

the challenges and adversities of their work, especially with difficult projects, because *their team is the source of strength, power, and overall success*. The group's capabilities and survivability are much greater than those of any one individual. "United we stand, divided we fall" and "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts" are well-known examples of Peak Performance Team spirit. With their superior level of teamwork, these teams get results by completing their work on time, within budget, and with appropriate quality – performance.

In my experience, most teams (whether a family, business, committee, or work team) operate on a Mock or Transition Team level. They spend too much time and energy on competitive, self-defeating behaviors and attitudes that erode their achievement and success. Most companies I've worked for had Mock Teams. Not surprisingly, these organizations struggled to make money and to deliver their goods and services on time. Their lack of teamwork, leadership, and organization often impeded the work of the employees. I certainly found it difficult to perform at a peak level in those high-turmoil, dysfunctional environments. Remember, without consistent teamwork there are no real teams.

During the 12 years that I managed the ergonomic manufacturing business, I learned that Peak Performance Team principles were effective with employees, suppliers, professional contacts, and customers. I was committed to keeping these people on my team. The approach was important for building positive, functional relationships, solving problems quickly, and helping the company operate more effectively.

Good examples of Peak Performance Teams are more successful families, committees, teams, and organizations that excel. They have a real edge over their competition, and that edge is Peak Performance Teamwork.

TEAMWORK SURVEY

As I worked on this book, I collaborated with a market research company to handle a national survey of managers and employees regarding teamwork and the workplace. Some highlights from the respondents follow:

- **Almost 75% had teams in their workplace.**
- **More than 90% thought teamwork was important or very important for the success of projects.**
- **More than 90% thought teamwork was important or very important for the workplace overall.**
- **More than 80% thought it was important or very important to increase teamwork in the workplace.**
- **More than 60% were aware of conflicts ranging from every few months to weekly.**
- **Almost 80% thought employees/non-managers were better team players than bosses or managers.**
- **About 22% of the respondents were managers and about 68% were employees/contract employees (the other 10% were consultants/others).**

The survey respondents were from varied industries and areas, including healthcare, education, government, retail, hotel/restaurant, manufacturing, marketing, technology, construction, insurance, legal/accounting, etc.

As the survey indicates, many organizations have teams, and many employees and managers think teamwork is important. At the same time, there is a significant need to *increase* teamwork (only about 10% thought teamwork was sufficient). Conflicts occurred at a high enough rate to disrupt teamwork and team cohesion. A

large number of respondents thought employees were better team players compared to bosses and managers.

Now we'll build on these concepts of teamwork, team-building, and team management. We'll explore principles and techniques for improving teamwork skills for workers, managers, and owners. Later, we'll look at additional ideas to improve the current culture of workplace interaction and productivity for everyone.